Studying User Appropriation of University and Secondary school «Learning Centers»: Methodological Questions and Issues

Susan Kovacs
University of Lille 3 – Nord de France, Geriico Research Laboratory, France. Email: susan.kovacs@univ-lille3.fr

Yolande Maury
Artois University/ESPhé, Geriico Research Laboratory, France. Email: yolande.maury@noos.fr

Abstract
How can Information-Communication researchers define a protocol for the study of emergent phenomena? In the context of a research project examining the creation of nine Learning Centers in France, we were faced with this query. The concept of the “Learning Center” has been taken up as a new model for the library, a “place” situated between learning, training, teaching, living and “being.” We were interested in the ways in which different actors appropriate the idea of the Learning Center and which dimensions they choose to develop or adapt. Rather than evaluating the degree of successful compliance to a model, we sought to understand how actors “do with” and co-construct this new form of the library through their uses of space. Our inquiry, as applied to information practices and culture, foregrounds the issue of the most pertinent approach to empirical study. Ethnography is a powerful tool for in-depth study of users as they participate in the definition of informational devices. While comparing our methodological choices to certain observational techniques, we explore the strengths and limits of an approach in which the focal points of observation, undefined at the outset through floating attention, become more accurate during the different phases of observation and interviewing. The relevance of certain data collection instruments used for describing and understanding “seeing” over time (ethnographic fieldnotes, photographs) is also discussed. We attempt to show that emergent phenomena require an open-ended, comprehensive approach; a posteriori categorization can afford a rich way to investigate user practices in an as yet undefined institutional setting.

Keywords: appropriation, library, learning center, space, qualitative research

Introduction
In her study of the notion of “context” in information practices, Christina Courtright reminds us that an informational environment is not a given, nor a mere “framework” for action, but that it is continually constructed, defined and redefined by individuals by and through their activities (Courtright, 2007). Research into information practices has time and again underscored the need to recognize the “setting” as anything but a stable backdrop (Elmborg, 2011). At the same time, as we consider the nature of the appropriations of library services, we are tempted to begin the study with a clear-cut analysis and mapping of the architecture, the zones and spaces and associated resources, in order to determine how library patrons identify, interact with, or counteract the logistical and symbolic “offer” made to them.

This problem of defining the informational environment comes particularly to the fore when we consider the case of new or emergent spaces such as the “Learning Center,” which has elicited much interest in the past few years in France within the university and secondary school arenas. The emergent nature of the learning center in France derives not only from the very concept of the “learning center” which has, as yet, not come into clear focus, but also, from the fact that most of the sites selected for our study are themselves still in the process of creation or implementation of new learning centers, and therefore, are as yet in an experimental phase (Maury et al., 2014). Indeed, as our research shows, the very notion of the learning center is less a physical space, than a project, an undertaking, an ongoing process intended to introduce, promote and experiment with, new kinds of collaborative interactions and a blending of...
leisure and work activities. This complexity thus leads to a degree of methodological caution not unlike that to which constructivist approaches already invite the researcher, when seeking to relativize the a priori “reality” of the environmental components of informational practice. What sort of protocol for study can best allow for the exploration of the “coming into being” of the learning center in France today? If qualitative study appears suited to the given objectives of this inquiry, to what extent does the observational protocol seem to project or to anticipate the relationships between users and newly conceived spaces? How and when should the actors’ discourse be confronted with observation of practice?

In this article we will first discuss the main objectives of our study, the types of research questions which we have sought to address, and then explain how our methodological stance and observational methods grew out of an initial exploratory contact with the sites chosen for our study. Presentation of some significant examples of the data obtained, as related to methodological issues and to interpretive challenges, will allow us to offer some insight into the strengths and potential weaknesses of the protocol chosen to carry out this study, and to point out some of the ways in which the study of user appropriations of learning centers can make us more attentive to relational and dynamic processes which define information culture.

The Learning center in France, a concept, a process?

Much of the discussion in France concerning the Learning center begins with a reminder that this innovative approach to the library is an idea which has been imported from the US or the UK, and is currently being adapted within the context of French university or secondary schools, as well as within the institutional and geographic context of the specific sites which have chosen to pursue the objectives of the Learning center. Thus, the French learning center is at the outset presented as a translational or transformational process. Within university settings the transformation of the academic library into a “learning center” has focused on the need to revitalize and to revisit the role of the university library, through expanded and modernized online services and digitalized resources, through the creation of spaces for collaborative exchange between students and/or students and their professors, and through increased access to various cultural or leisure activities allowing to redefine the university library as a place “to be” as well as a place for more active learning. Within secondary schools such a project has been taken to signify the development of a new learning environment designed to accompany pupils rather than to dispense knowledge to them, while creating closer proximities between the “vie scolaire” services (attendance and discipline offices, guidance counseling) and the traditional school library.

Promotional discourse (found in project statements, school and institutional web sites, press releases) revolves around the learning center as a response to students’ new needs and expectations and as an opportunity for enhancing or enabling students’ academic and professional potential through modernization of services and technology. While the attractiveness of this equation between students’ success and the modernized library services, in political terms, is an undeniable factor in obtaining the necessary funding of the architectural and infrastructural modifications involved, and while the modernization of library facilities and services has also been used as an argument for potential cost reduction through downsized staff, the learning center projects all present an attempt to attribute a new pertinence to the school or university library by recognizing its potential as a pivotal, cultural and academic service at the heart of the learning community. The key concepts of renewal, revolution, innovation, modernization, often mentioned in professional literature or promotional discourse, seemed to us an interesting starting point for our study: just what sort of “revolution” does the Learning center represent for the actors involved? How is each center experienced (and activated) by the members of each community and how are these innovations perceived and indeed, acted out in the daily ordinary activities of students, teachers, and other actors (parents, school counselors and attendance officers, university staff and faculty, and the nearby local population to whom these innovations are often also addressed)? Reorganized and redesigned spaces, architectural projects and new services affect users not only in the sphere of informational practice but in defining the very culture of a given community. Thus in methodological terms we were interested in developing a protocol allowing for comprehension of new library services as they are integrated into a range of social practices, of which academic, and more precisely, informational, activities are a part.

In addition to taking into account this nexus of interrelated social practices, we were faced with another challenge: the different sites chosen for the study (four secondary schools, and five university-level libraries) are in varying degrees of “completion” of their learning center project (see Table 1). Each site has its specific goals and priorities, yet in most cases the resources and services developed to reach these goals are not only most often still in the developmental phase, but are seen as a progressive series of adaptive innovations, to be decided and negotiated along the way as a function of how different members of the community invest their time and energy in the project.
## Table 1: Nine Learning Center projects in France

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning center (LC)</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Timetable</th>
<th>LC Project status during inquiry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school 1 (Prof. Vocational, high school Alsace)</td>
<td>Motivate students, interaction between faculty/staff/students</td>
<td>(1) 2013-: restructured spaces, digital resources improved /added (2) 2014-: modifying practices</td>
<td>Ongoing spatial modifications; discussion about new roles for staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prep school Residence 2 (Ile-de-France)</td>
<td>Modernize facilities to create new learning environment</td>
<td>(1) 2008-: networking resources Phase 2 2013-: Reorganized spaces, extensions</td>
<td>Ongoing spatial modifications; preparation for new digital resources; discussion about roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School 3 (Nord-Pas de Calais)</td>
<td>“Connected school”: new technology to improve pedagogy</td>
<td>(1) 2012-2013: spaces reconfigured; (2) 2013-2014: IT development</td>
<td>Evaluating ITs; Consolidating partnerships, changing roles for staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School 4 (Midi-Pyrénées)</td>
<td>LC developed “naturally” out of proximities between library and attendance office</td>
<td>(1) 2003: reorganized spaces; (2) 2010: formalized restructuring as LC</td>
<td>Ongoing reflection on digital resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science University Library 5 (Ile-de-France)</td>
<td>New building: modular spaces and services for collaborative workspace and learning sessions</td>
<td>2012: Notion of LC integrated into architectural project; January 2013: new library inaugurated</td>
<td>LC boundaries in question: library? Campus?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business School 6 (Ile-de-France)</td>
<td>Online service expansion, new work spaces and cultural offerings</td>
<td>2008: renovated library spaces and services</td>
<td>Undergoing evaluation for updating of LC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Technology university 7 (Nord-Pas de Calais)</td>
<td>LC “innovation”: new spaces to develop community</td>
<td>Feb. 2014: Science center opened 2017: completion architectural project</td>
<td>Construction underway; new services/programs currently developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities and social science university 8 (Nord-Pas de Calais)</td>
<td>Humanities LC sub-theme: Egyptology/Arc heology; Pre-project submitted to funding institutions, renovation of library bldg</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing projects: renew current spaces (expositions, conferences)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polytechnic engineering university 9</td>
<td>“Third place” for engineering students</td>
<td>4 phases starting 2009;</td>
<td>Ongoing: reinforce services and restructure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Midi-Pyrénées | Innovate teaching, create informal exchange for students, teachers, local businesses | multi-function spaces |

As can be seen in Table 1 and in mission statements and pre-project papers, each site presents new and reconfigured spaces and architecture as key ingredients of the “revolutionized” library setting. The emblematic Rolex learning center at the Swiss federal institute of technology in Lausanne is just one example of the emphasis placed by learning center planners, upon the importance of redefined, updated, and significant spatial configurations as central to the learning center “experience.” Could our study take into account the ongoing processual aspect of each project through an inquiry into the role of space? To what extent could the appropriation of the learning center be analyzed as a function of the users’ experience of and in, the spaces of each site?

### Qualitative study of LC appropriation: an anthropology of space

Recent study of library use, and in particular use of space, has turned within the past ten or fifteen years toward qualitative inquiry and more specifically, ethnographic study of user practices, activities, and interactions (Caraco, 2013). In the university library setting, ethnographic studies of student activities such as their use of library facilities in the course of research projects, have demonstrated the interest of such tools as observation, interviews, focus groups and cognitive mapping, all of which allow for the creation of a holistic view of user practice through detailed description, and an inductive interpretive approach (Bryant et al, 2009; Duke & Ascher, 2012).

Yet qualitative study is not merely an effective way to understand the library from the user’s point of view; methodological choices derive from the very definition of research objects and objectives. Indeed, the interest in qualitative investigation has accompanied an expanded vision of what constitutes informational practice in everyday experience, and also, a broader definition of what sort of activities take place in informational environments (Maury & Etevè, 2010; Béguin-Verbrugge & Kovacs, 2011). Beyond the models of information seeking, finding and sharing, we were interested in trying to understand what social practices take place in the learning center as space and place, and how different actors “do with” the services proposed to them and thereby co-construct their environment. This approach implies that the actor is not simply “reacting” to, or “receiving” the library’s features and offerings, but that he or she also somehow participates in its constitution. As Huizing and Cavanagh have
suggested, the conflict in practice theory between objective (order as determining human behaviour) and subjective (human agency determines order) positions, can perhaps best be resolved through an intermediate posture; the study of practice requires an attention to what people actually do and “to the processual forms of doing, knowing and organizing out of which order and change arise” (Huizing & Cavanagh, 2011).

This approach to practice implies an inquiry into the dynamics of the library, into the patterns, forces and changes by which users experience and give meaning to the spaces and services of the library. As Michel de Certeau has suggested “space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities” (1984, 117). Space in the library setting can be seen thus as such as “practiced place” (Certeau, 1984); Certeau’s distinction between the mobility of space (constructed through practice) as opposed to the stability of “place” is in this sense not unlike the distinction between “third space” with its creative instability and moving borders and “third place” (or simplified commodified place) discussed by Elmborg (2011). Space as practiced place can be seen as relative and relational rather than absolute (Hall, 1966); a proxemic approach to library appropriation takes into account how users adapt resources and spaces to their needs and thus develop forms of knowing or learning in the process of their activity (Rogoff, 1995). As a “process of becoming,” the notion of appropriation implies the emergence of an identity through action.

Our study of learning center appropriation through the analysis of practices of and in space can thus be seen as informed by an anthropological perspective, in that each site is considered as a whole, which implies taking into account its multiple dimensions and establishing relationships between them (Laplantine, 2002, 49). Our stance differs from most ethnographic library studies which have as their primary or ultimate objective an evaluation or improvement of services or infrastructures. In order to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of the learning center, the point of departure for our study was to consider all practices as relevant, and in so doing to avoid as much as possible the imposition of an a priori analytic framework or listing of criteria to be taken into account. How do ethnographic tools allow for the study of the learning center as considered from this inclusive, social constructivist perspective?

Ethnological study: from wide-ranging and in-depth observation to identified dynamics and points of tension

Different qualitative techniques have been developed to study the use of spaces in the library and the library as place (May, 2011) in particular within the public library (Given & Leckie, 2003; Aabo & Audunson, 2012). In an attempt to relate the nature of activities to the different spaces in which they are carried out, researchers have developed spatial mapping techniques such as cognitive mapping by which library users are asked to draw schematic representations of the library space and its resources. This technique allows researchers to gain insight into users’ perception of library spaces and facilities. Interpretation of this data can yield unexpected and useful results in particular when compared to representations of the same space as drawn by librarians (Fabre & Veyrac, 2008). Other techniques, based on direct observation, include the seating sweeps method. Given and Leckie developed an inquiry into social activities in the Toronto public libraries using this sweeping technique, by which user activity in specific locations of the library was recorded by means of a coded check list of types of behaviors (Given & Leckie, 2003). In this study, researchers included in their checklist not only the activities being carried out but the types of belongings users had with them, thus collecting rich data concerning the ways in which library patrons construct and personalize their environment. Although the coding process tends to produce results based only upon pre-categorized elements, this technique presents the advantage of direct observation of the relation to space. Since our priority was to gain insight into user activities and practices, direct and unobtrusive observation seemed of particular interest for our study.

However unlike the “sweeps” method we sought to understand user practices more fully over time, through immersion in the learning center. Rather than to identify or enumerate activities in a static way, we wished to observe how and where these practices begin, to what extent they are developed and how they evolve. In addition, the pre-coded behavior checklist, while an effective tool for the researcher once the primary major activities have been included in the list, tends to close the investigation to the unusual or the unexpected.

If observation seemed relevant as a primary investigative tool, reliance on established lists of research objects or phenomena to be observed seemed likely to introduce a fundamental bias or pre-reading of the learning center. Unlike a priori research protocols with pre-coded categories to be sought or verified, our a posteriori stance required that any hypothesis derive from a reading of data obtained; observations were not conceived as “proof” but as having potential significance in a process of discovery (Paillé, 2006). Thus, after the initial contact with the staff and directors at each site, which allowed us to collect information concerning the history and “philosophy” of each project, as well as floor maps and architectural plans on paper, we preferred to begin our study with preliminary observations in and around the learning center, giving “free-floating” and in-depth attention to all possible aspects of learning center features and activity. This was accomplished by two primary means: walking slowly through the libraries and noting in as much detail as possible the organization and presentation of the learning center facilities and user
practices, and choosing a vantage point, by taking a seat at a chosen spot at one of the tables or armchairs of the learning center in order to observe users in the surrounding environment for a chosen period of time (usually up to an hour). Our fieldnotes included as many elements of observation as we could possibly record, including but not limited to, activities and interactions, gestures, objects, movements, etc.

After an initial exploratory phase (of one or two day observations at each learning center), followed by discussion with members of the research team in order to discuss and compare our preliminary observations, a non exhaustive list of “dimensions” for discovery was proposed (see Table 2) as having potential for investigation during the course of further ethnographic observation. These elements were not to be taken as a closed framework or guide to direct each researcher’s exclusive attention but as an open-ended proposition of interrelated points of interest arising from initial contact and observations, to which each researcher was encouraged to add any emergent phenomena.

Table 2: Dimensions for observational study of Learning Centers (LC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boundaries of the LC</th>
<th>Where does the LC start and end? What zones are present or suggested? Modular zones, hybrid zones? Boundaries between the LC and other “competing” or complementary spaces?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uses, practices within different spaces (apparent or emerging)</td>
<td>Occupation of space, unoccupied spaces, ignored spaces, spaces “(re)defined” by users through unexpected activity; the relative importance given to activities of learning/teaching/training and living/“place to be” in different spaces; use of tools and resources; informational features such as reference desk, leisure sections, other services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tensions</td>
<td>Noise/quiet; acceptance/resistance; autonomy/collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules and regulations; modus vivendi</td>
<td>Rights, obligations, interdictions, and how these rules contribute to the rhythm of life in the LC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Identity” of the LC</td>
<td>Terms or symbols which appear or are posted (“library”, “learning center”, etc) to designate or characterize each site (on signs or sign systems in around the LC or on other materials such as web sites); How do sign systems and wayfinding systems present and differentiate spaces and their presumed functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, emerging dimensions</td>
<td>Unexpected, surprising aspects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The advantage of an open-ended approach was that we arrived with no preconceived criteria for observation and were able to “take in” different slices of life at each site. When possible, and in cases where we obtained the permission to take photographs, we did so, at a discrete distance from users, in order to help record these moments. Photography allowed us to create traces of continuous changes over time (added or modified resources), and to interpret these changes in light of our observations. Pictures of changing or moved furniture for example provided interesting clues to the ways in which spatial reconfigurations decided by the library staff were unfolding in time, with possible consequences for the types of collaborations between those responsible for different services or rooms (Maury & Kovacs, 2014). However while our intent was to remain as unobtrusive as possible, this was more problematic in the secondary school setting in part because of the need to make and maintain regular contact with the librarians and their staff and other teachers in order to carry out this research project. Unlike the university setting, secondary school libraries are closely monitored and access to schools for ethnographic research calls for more and closer involvement with actors. In one of the high school learning centers for example we were once asked by a teacher to assist pupils with an assignment. While university learning centers allowed for more detached observation, secondary school and university actors alike were often eager to share their experiences with us, in order to exchange ideas about their initiatives and projects, even though we had presented our research objectives as purely analytical. When possible, we carried out at least three to four continuous hours of observation on each day, and between four to eight half-days of observation for each site. In order to gain familiarity with a limited number of sites, the six members of the research project each conducted observations of two or three of the learning centers. This division of labor allowed us not only greater immersion than if each researcher were to conduct observations at each site (given time and funding constraints), but also, since each site was observed by at least two members of the team on different days, we were able to compare our perspectives, as a form of data triangulation, and thus gain greater insight into each learning center.

In both cases (university and secondary school) one of the weaknesses of the observational approach remained the difficulty of observing close hand the on-screen, reading and mobile phone activities of learning center users. Thus we were not able to observe with precision the nature or content of catalogue requests, note taking or studying activities and exchanges, especially within the enclosed study rooms for collaborative or team work present in the university learning centers. This difficulty remains one of the weak points of the investigation, which we tried in part to overcome through brief informal conversations with learning center users, including those people we had observed directly, during which we asked why they had come to the learning center that day, which resources they had come to use, in which rooms or spaces they were going to work or had worked that day, and for what reason they generally came to the learning center. We also noted when possible during these informal conversations the students’ grade level or university degree or year.
Ethnographic interviews, while valuable data collection tools, were considered as a secondary or supporting technique, in particular as another form of data triangulation. User discourse collected in the interview process, while shedding light on different actors’ attitudes or opinions, and while allowing actors to produce a rendering of his or her own activities, constitutes (no matter how well-intentioned the interviewee) a fundamentally different form of data from observation and the observational materials of note-taking and photography. That is not to say that the researcher’s observations are completely devoid of certain a priori conceptions or that direct observation provides unmediated and uniquely privileged access to the ‘field’ as if looking through a window onto the world (Hert, 2014). These precautions do not diminish however the potential gains of observation as a primary data-collecting device, since individuals are not always able to explain (or to remember) their activities, routines, gestures and are also likely to avoid mentioning certain choices they might consider to be in some way transgressive behavior or simply of little interest.

At the same time, semi-structured, open-ended interviews can clarify certain practices and bring to light users’ motivations and attitudes. We considered that both informal conversations and formal interviews could be useful, notably in order to ask users to comment upon or react to certain of the observed practices or phenomena. Formal interviews were conducted with members of the teaching and library staff after the observations were completed or well underway. Questions asked during the in-depth interviews (one to two hours in duration) were designed to elicit detailed responses and commentaries concerning the actor’s conception of the learning center (or learning centers in general), his or her descriptions and opinion of its spatial and temporal characteristics and the type and degree of changes he or she thought were involved in the learning center project, in particular with regard to the relative importance given to activities or resources associated with “learning,” “teaching,” “training” and/or “being.” Actors were also asked to remark upon any new, significant or unexpected practices they had noticed or that we brought to their attention.

Methodological questions and issues: the example of space and/as identity

To what extent can we evaluate the relevance of these methodological choices? Although full results of this research project will be presented and discussed elsewhere, some of the questions directly arising from observations of the appropriation of space can provide an idea of the relative strengths and weaknesses of our approach.

In each of the centers selected for study, the question of “borders” or boundaries of the learning center came to the fore early on during the initial phase of contact with project managers and during preliminary observations; this question seemed as well to touch upon a number of often sensitive issues for the different actors. The boundaries between zones or between the learning center and “competing” spaces, were mentioned in the mission statements which we consulted and the initial project presentations which librarians proposed to us before observations began. We also noted during our preliminary observations for example, that different signs designating and naming the learning center or its services could be found at varied entrance points or “borders” such as doorways or hallways (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Signs and “borders” to identify spaces](image)

The signposts of one university learning center featured the word “library” (in French) while the words “learning center” appeared in English, and at one secondary school, the door leading to part of the learning center featured two different signs mentioning “attendance services” and “library.” These signs led us to investigate the problem of naming and designating the learning center and we were thus prompted to include, in formal interviews, questions pertaining to the contradictions between mission statements promoting the learning center as an integrated service, and the signposts retaining the names of the different services associated with the learning center. Interviews and further observations then allowed us to investigate the issue of naming and identifying zones and spaces as related to ways in which different actors perceive their professional roles or their stake in the learning center.

Initial observations also allowed us to identify some of the ways in which users experience and “act out” differentiated zones within the learning center or between the inside and outside of the learning center. At High School 1 we observed that few of the teachers chose to use the central staircase of the newly opened learning center to descend to the lower level of the school and the classes and spaces below. Another route was possible, and we observed that teachers used stairs which were located on the outside of the LC. At the same time, at this school, the librarian, as well as teachers who worked regularly with students in the learning center, generally kept to the upper level “library section” although the learning center at this high school comprises several differentiated spaces (the upper floor library section, the lower floor “attendance” and quiet study room, and an outer atrium for informal study and conversation). This observed...
practice led us to investigate the issue of how the borders are defined by the actors of each learning center. One teacher (High School 1) explained in a formal interview conducted after our observations of these seemingly self-imposed “limits” on actors’ movements in space, that she was reluctant to descend into the study hall section of the learning center because there, pupils might not recognize her or understand her role. Both observation and subsequent discourse allowed us to question the ways in which reorganized spaces imply new or modified roles for library professionals, faculty and staff. New and peripheral spaces, especially spaces conceived as hybrid work and social spaces suggest changes in roles and identities, which can produce a certain feeling of insecurity or identitary uncertainty.

In certain cases, learning center actors’ attitudes and opinions, collected through informal conversation or formal interviews, prompted us to redirect our attention to specific details related to the occupation of spaces by students. Once again the issue of boundaries can provide an example of this use of interviews to refocus our attention during observations. We observed, at High School 2, a residence hall for high school graduates enrolled in demanding preparatory classes, that certain students worked in the evenings at tables located in the hallways located near the “library” spaces. This observation, followed by an informal conversation with one student who explained why she preferred the hallway to the library or other study hall facilities provided in the residence hall, led us to question the link between chosen fields of study and the interest for the learning center. The student we encountered explained that as a math and physics major, she did not consider the library to be useful to her, unlike her fellow literary students. Our observations had at first allowed us to investigate how students occupy the different spaces and rooms of this “tentacular” learning center, constructing and deconstructing its center and periphery; conversation also provided an element related to the disciplinary identity of students as related to the choice of space.

The choice of immersion over time provided clues as well to the nature of spaces as “territories” of or for certain groups. At Business School 6, for example, the arrival of a faculty member in search of a group of his students, was an unusual event (he needed directions to find the study room); this learning center as we had previously observed it was almost completely dominated by students.

Observations served also to verify discourse and sometimes to invalidate or call into question certain opinions. While a sense of ‘losing ground’ was apparent in the discourse of librarians in one university learning center who worried that students found what they needed in the nearby cafeteria or atrium spaces, our observations showed that students in their practices (and discourse) clearly differentiated the roles they attributed to each space and considered the learning center and the surrounding cafeteria, atrium and student bars and lounges, as complementary rather than competing places of study, socializing, conversation. All of these activities were observed in the learning center and in the other nearby “gathering,” work and eating places, but as we noted, they were carried out in different ways.

Conclusion
Our approach to the learning center as an evolutive process led us to question the ways in which spatial, structural and technological reconfigurations were linked to changes in the daily activities and roles of different actors. This research project was therefore an opportunity to define a study protocol which could take into account the ongoing processual aspect of nine different learning center projects in France. Our methodological choices allowed us to remain receptive to the widest possible range of user practices not only as they take place “within” each learning center but as they contribute to the very construction and definition of the learning center itself, as space and place. Ethnographic observation over the course of several months, in an a posteriori inductive approach to data collection and analysis, led us progressively to focus our attention upon significant regularities in user behavior in time and space. Yet we also remained attentive to emergent or unexpected activities, seemingly marginal, but which pointed up possibilities for further investigation.

One of the difficulties inherent in this methodological stance is that of the interpretive activity which involves putting into words that which has been observed, with all of its nuances, regularities, differences. The written rendering of the learning center as it is experienced and appropriated by users requires a delicate balance and a constant dialogical movement between the empirical and the theoretical, the seen and the known, in an attempt to arrive at meaning. The challenge of this dialogic approach to qualitative research data as it is reshaped and textualized is that it seeks to associate as much as possible the sensible (that which the researcher derives from observation, the senses, the affect) and the intelligible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
We would like to extend our thanks to the “Lille Métropole Communauté Urbaine” for support provided for our interdisciplinary research project “Library (r)evolutions: the learning center, a new model to investigate” (2013-2014).

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**Curriculum Vitae**

**Susan Kovacs** is Senior Lecturer in Information-Communication Sciences at the University of Lille 3 (Université Nord de France) and member of the GERiiCO Research Group. Her research interests include the history of information and reading practices, the circulation and appropriation of knowledge in formal and informal contexts.

**Yolande Maury** is Senior Lecturer in Information and Communication Sciences at Artois University/ESPé since 2006, and member of GERiiCO (Lille 3). She is coordinator of the Master’s degree program in Documentацию at the University Lille 3. Her teaching and research interests focus on: the history and epistemology of information-documentation, information education and culture, transformations of media, circulation and mediation of knowledge. She is the author of two books on information-documentation in school context.