

The Desk or the Bed?

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Assertions that studying is done best at a desk rather than on a bed are largely untested. In the present study the GPA of students working at their desks was compared with that of students studying on their beds. There was no difference in the GPA's of the two groups. The assumption that there is a single type of study environment optimal for all students appears unwarranted. Since a sizable number of college students use their beds and even the floor for studying, the use of softer and more comfortable furniture in libraries and study halls deserves consideration.

STUDENTS ARE frequently admonished by their instructors, counselors, and by the authors of study manuals to stay at their desks and avoid their beds at all costs while studying. Some books go so far as to specify the proper dimensions and decor for a study desk. Students are also urged to "choose a straight-backed chair rather than a very comfortable one" (Youle-White, 1963). "All of the votes are in favor of a simple, rugged, straight-backed chair with no cushions. You study best when you're not too comfortable or relaxed. . . . For obvious reasons, avoid studying on a couch, easy chair, or in bed" (Lass & Wilson, 1965). And finally, "A bed is no place to study. Neither is a sofa, nor a foam-rubber lounge chair. When you become too relaxed and comfortable physically, your concentration also relaxes. A straight-backed, wooden chair is best for most students; it allows them

to work at maximum concentration for longer periods" (Woodley, 1961).

Unfortunately, no data are presented to support these recommendations. The goal of the present study was to learn how good students, as compared with poor students, actually study. If we find, for example, that good students habitually study at their desks while failing students lounge on their beds, this would be support for these recommendations. The writers were fortunate in having available the data from a larger investigation of dormitory environments. In the course of the study, site visits were made to college dormitories and students were interviewed in the afternoon and evening. The data collected included (a) whether or not the person was presently studying, (b) whether he was sitting at his desk, on the bed, or somewhere else, and (c) his grade-point average (GPA).

PROCEDURE

The interviews took place in dormitories on eight different campuses, including three universities, four state colleges, and one junior college. At most campuses, several dormitories were surveyed. With

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the prior permission of the college housing officer, the interviewer visited the student's room and was therefore able to observe studying *in situ*. We were concerned, not with the student's "preferences" for the desk or the bed, but where he actually was studying.

RESULTS

To simplify analysis we discarded all cases where the students were studying on the floor, on a couch, or any place other than the desk or the bed. This yielded a total of 331 students, of whom 171 were studying at desks and 160 were studying on beds. When we checked the grade-point averages of the two groups, there was no difference between them. Dividing the groups at the median GPA, one finds 50 per cent of the higher GPA students studying on the bed and 50 per cent at their desks. Of the students below the median GPA, 47 per cent studied at their bed and 53 per cent at the desk. If we make a more detailed breakdown of very poor and very good students, the same lack of difference appears. Of the 18 students with GPA's less than 2.00, six had been studying at their beds and 12 at their desks. Of the 86 students whose GPA's were 3.00 or better, 46 per cent had been studying on their beds compared to 53 per cent at their desks.

A parallel finding appeared when we re-analyzed the data from a previous study (Estabrook & Sommer, 1966) where students had been asked where they typically studied when there was material to be read. In view of the present hypothesis, we correlated the responses with GPA. The honors students were equally divided between the desk and the bed (or couch), but of the nine students doing less than 2.00 work, seven typically studied at their desks and two on their beds.

DISCUSSION

There is nothing in these data to support the recommendations for studying in a straight-backed chair at a desk. Almost as many students were found studying on their beds as were found at their desks. In fact, if one adds together those students who were studying on couches or sprawled on the floor with their books laid out around them, one finds only a minority of

students studying at their desks. There is no evidence that the desk studiers do any better in their work than the non-desk students. Architects Van der Ryn and Silverstein (1967) asked Berkeley students to keep activity logs and then followed this up with detailed interviewing. The logs showed that the bed was the favored location for study. Interviews revealed that students considered the desk too small for assignments needing room to spread out and that the desk chair was uncomfortable as a sitting place for long periods. The height of the desk was poor for some students and others could not cross their legs while seated.

It is clear that people have a variety of needs when it comes to study environments. In a previous paper (Sommer, 1966) it was found that some students retreat as far as possible in the library stacks while others prefer to work in study halls in the physical presence of other people. Some maintain that there are fewer distractions in the study halls, where there is a general background of noise and movement, than in the stacks where every sound stands out. We have found students who prefer to study in cafeterias where they can snack frequently, while others want to be as far as possible from eating places. There are also people who prefer to study in the music listening room, the student lounge, and even in the bowling alley. There is no single optimal study space for introverts and extroverts, freshmen and advanced graduate students, music students and physical education majors. Freedman (1967) described his observations of young adults from lower class backgrounds who were part of an Upward Bound program at San Francisco State College. These students preferred to study together, to work in the presence of other people, rather than adopt the traditional middle class pattern of individual studying. The classic study by Thorndike, McCall, and Chapman (1916) shows that students were able to perform the same amount and quality of work under rather unwholesome conditions of temperature, humidity, and ventilation.

Research into educational spaces from the standpoint of user behavior is long overdue. This research is necessary since many current theories have been codified

into educational and architectural programs. For example, the dormitories on this campus do *not* contain padded chairs in the students' rooms. An even more extreme situation is the policy that entering freshman girls, for the first six months, must spend certain hours every weekday evening studying *at their desks*. This "study table" regulation, which is enforced by the dormitory advisers, appears to be based on the idea that studying can be done best at the desk. It can be noted that this regulation did not affect the present data, since entering freshmen were excluded from our comparisons because they lacked a GPA that could be used in subsequent comparisons. Since half the honors students work at their beds, it is difficult to see why freshmen should be required to study at their desks.

It is true that many students use their desks when they have writing or typing to do, but a large portion of study time is used for reading and underlining. Also, when students have a lot of individual research to do, with many sources and reference works to check, they frequently prefer to work on a large surface such as a kitchen

table if it is available, or on the floor, rather than at a desk. The frequent use of beds, couches, and other non-desk study areas has implications for the design and furnishing of study rooms in schools and colleges.

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