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The liminal space: academic literacies practitioners' construction of professional identity in the betwixt and between

Michelle Joubert [1,*]

[1] Head, Academic Language and Literacy Development, University of the Free State, South Africa
* Correspondence: joubertma@ufs.ac.za

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Abstract

Research on third space practitioners in higher education has gained traction since the mid-2010s. However, less research has been done on academic literacy practitioners as third space practitioners, and their often-marginalised positioning at many South African higher education institutions. This is despite their integral role in student success, and the fact that many South African academic literacy practitioners support the academic literacies development of thousands of students. At the same time, many also negotiate problematic binaries in terms of institutional conceptualisations and positionings of academic literacies development. This article explores how academic literacy practitioners construct their professional identities and manage the complex tensions that are often an inherent part of these professional identities. Using qualitative data, this research explores which institutional structures and cultures surround academic literacy practitioners, and what constraining or enabling effects these have on how they

perform their roles and construct their professional identities. The findings highlight that research helps academic literacy practitioners establish a professional identity and legitimise the value of academic literacies development work. Participants also spoke about the importance of communities of practice and collaboration in shaping their professional identities. Although this paper focuses on South Africa, the findings will likely be useful in other contexts where academic literacy practitioners negotiate problematic binaries while trying to construct professional identities.

Keywords academic literacy development; academic literacy practitioners; identity; liminal; third space

Context and problem

Despite the inherent importance of academic literacies development (ALD) in South African higher education, there are still several misconceptions about what ALD is and what it should aim to achieve. At many institutions, ALD is often misunderstood as being *solely* remedial and only aimed at students who are deemed 'at risk' in one way or another (Cottrell, 2019; Wingate, 2006). This remedial view of ALD is despite calls from several scholars (see Bond, 2020; Clarence, 2011; Dison and Moore, 2019; Jacobs, 2005, 2007, 2010; Turner, 2011; Wingate and Tribble, 2012) for academic literacies practitioners (ALPs) to work collaboratively with other academics in integrating ALD work into mainstream curricula. Indeed, as Jacobs (2005: 870) argues, 'higher education [needs] to create discursive spaces for the collaboration of academic literacy practitioners and lecturers, to facilitate the embedding of academic literacy teaching into disciplines of study'.

The misunderstanding of ALD as solely remedial largely stems from the outdated view of ALD as being primarily about remediation and the development of language skills completely outside the curriculum. As such, it can be presented as 'bolt-on' and divorced from the mainstream academic curriculum (Macfarlane, 2010; Smit, 2012; Wingate, 2006). In reality, however, ALD has become increasingly folded into a research-informed, embedded approach (Hathaway, 2015; Wingate, 2018; Wingate and Tribble, 2012). ALD is neither solely a support service nor solely an academic endeavour, but both an academic, research-driven field (a 'branch of knowledge' [Hammarfelt, 2019: 4]) and a (peripheral) support service aimed at supporting students' development of disciplinary practices (Ding and Bruce, 2017).

The tension that results from this 'both/and' understanding of ALD – conscious or unconscious – can play out as an 'us versus them' narrative: the academic space on one side (positioned at the metaphorical centre and occupied by academic staff from more traditional academic disciplines, whereas ALD is more like a field of multiple and allied areas of research and practice) versus the non-academic/support space on the other side (usually positioned on the periphery) (Dobson, 2000; Whitchurch, 2008). This 'us versus them' narrative is mostly because the majority of higher education institutions in South Africa are still structured in terms of a traditional binary – the academic space and the non-academic/support space (Clarke et al., 2013; Dobson, 2000; McKay and Robson, 2023; Szekeres, 2004; Veles, 2022; Whitchurch, 2008, 2012, 2018). This traditional structural binary impacts many South African ALPs due to the emergence of a kind of 'round hole, square peg' dynamic in which ALPs grapple with their positioning as both academic and support professionals who do not neatly fit within the structures available to them. Neither the academic nor the support spaces fully encapsulate the nature of ALD work, and further tension can arise when there is a mismatch between where an ALP is positioned, how they identify professionally, and how their institution identifies them and their role. This will be unpacked in more detail below.

In inhabiting both the academic and the support spaces, many ALPs find their home in the space betwixt and between formal structures. This occupation of the in-between has implications for ALD work in itself – for example, institutional expectations of the aim of ALD, and how it is perceived by both staff and students – and for the people who do this work – for example, how they develop a professional identity in a space not formally recognised by their institutions. The aim of this article is thus to explore

how ALPs in the South African higher education sector make sense of this in-between space, how they make it their home, and how they construct a professional identity within it. Although the focus of this article is on the South African context, ALPs who navigate similar binaries and in-between spaces in other contexts are likely to find value in the results. Before continuing with this discussion, however, it is important to briefly outline the history of ALD in South Africa, since the historical conceptions of ALD still impact the field today.

Academic literacies development in South Africa

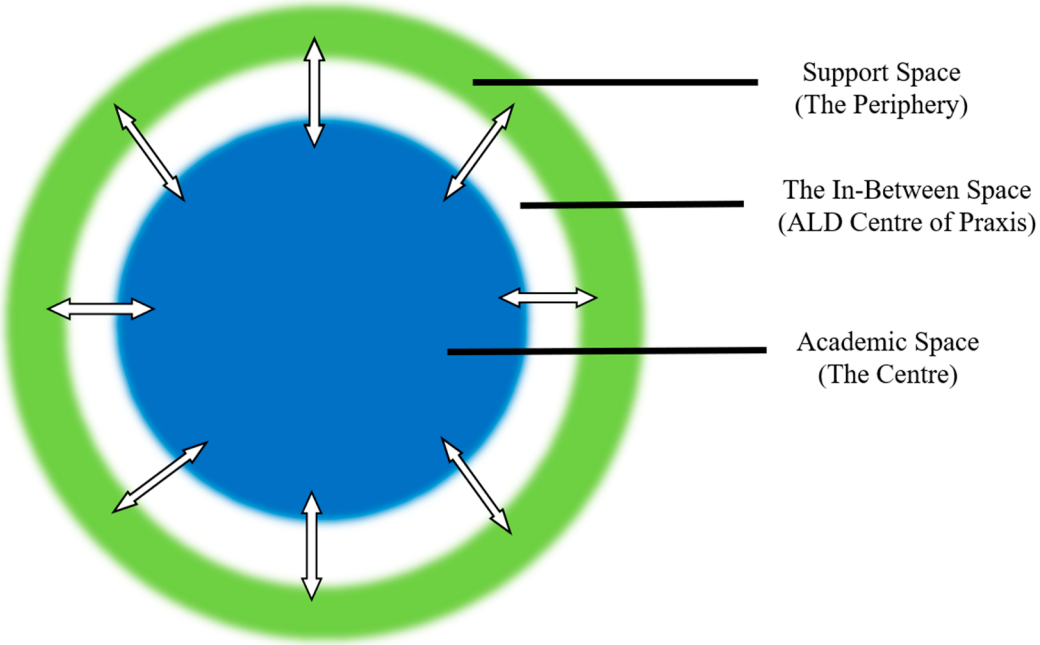
It is generally argued that the development of ALD, and academic development more broadly, has taken place over three distinct phases in South Africa. The first was a largely sociopolitical phase; support was aimed at previously ostracised students, who had come through the Bantu education system (Boughey, 2013; Boughey and Niven, 2012; McKenna, 2013). (The Bantu Education Act of 1953 governed the education of Black South Africans and focused on preparing them for manual labour [Giliomee, 2009].) This period was known as apartheid liberalisation (in the 1980s), and it led to an understanding of ALD as being primarily remedial and only for students with an English 'language problem', rather than anything to do with acquiring the literacy practices necessary for reading, writing and thinking about academic knowledge (Boughey, 2013; Boughey and Niven, 2012; Clegg, 2009; Scott, 2009; McKenna, 2013). During the second phase (the 1990s), ALD was seen as a formal academic undertaking. Research on language and literacies development was produced from multiple viewpoints, and ALPs challenged the remedial view of ALD (Boughey and Niven, 2012). The third phase (starting in the early 2000s at the neoliberal turn, and largely continuing today) focused again on the remedial, specifically on ways in which ALD support could help increase graduation and throughput rates (thus severing the strong, albeit brief, tie that ALD had to the academe) (Boughey, 2007). This shift in focus in the third phase, however, does seem to have made ALD work and its practitioners (as well as other third space practitioners) more visible, albeit with a skewed focus on the remedial. This phased history is not true of all South African institutions, and it primarily represents the developments in historically White and English-speaking universities (Boughey and Niven, 2012). However, it does illustrate tendencies in the field of ALD in South Africa, and the general shifts in how the field has been positioned and perceived. These shifts seem to have brought about long-lasting tension, which often plays out in the interplay between how ALPs are positioned institutionally and how they identify professionally.

The third space

An ALP's 'centre of praxis', to use Hadley's (2015: 39) term, can thus be described as a strange space that rests between the formally recognised academic and support spaces. This is illustrated in Figure 1: the white area represents the space generally inhabited by ALPs – resting betwixt and between the academic and support spaces – the green area represents the support space, often positioned on the periphery, and the blue space represents the academic space, often positioned as the centre. Although these spaces are often differentiated along hard boundaries, the reality is that these hard boundaries are becoming increasingly fluid. This reality is represented by the blurry edges of each space in Figure 1. This blurring of edges has been referred to as an 'unbundling' of roles by Macfarlane (2010), and as a 'blurring of boundaries' by Becher and Trowler (2001: 59). The blurring of these boundaries allows more fluid movement between the support, in-between and academic spaces, as represented by the white arrows.

Within the past two decades or so, higher education, globally, has become increasingly diverse in terms of its student populations (Wingate, 2015). This is also true of the South African context. This increased diversity has necessitated what Macfarlane (2010: 59) calls the 'unbundling' of the traditional tripartite role of academics (teaching, research and service) due to universities' attempts to systematise student support and decrease drop-out rates and attrition levels. This unbundling has, in turn, led to the growth of certain specialist support roles, normally housed within the support space, including student skills advisers, teaching and learning experts, and ALPs (Macfarlane, 2010). Yet, while many institutions have risen to 'meet the demands of the contemporary environment' (Whitchurch, 2008: 377) by ensuring that these specialist support roles exist and that there are specialists to fill them, many have not made adjustments to their traditional structures, which, as has been argued above, means that such specialists may find themselves wedged into spaces in which they do not fit exactly.

Figure 1. Academic literacies practitioners' centre of praxis



Indeed, the past two decades have seen theorists such as Whitchurch (2008, 2012, 2018), Clarke et al. (2013), Veles (2022) and McKay and Robson (2023) writing about the additional spaces that exist in higher education institutions; spaces that may not neatly fit within the traditional binary boundaries of academic and support. Specifically, these writers have adopted the concept of third space, which largely originates from Homi Bhabha's (1990, 1994) arguments about postcolonial contexts; the third space counters predominant colonial cultures and identities, and 'assimilates contradictories', enabling the emergence of new and shared identities (Bhabha, 1994: 56). Its application in higher education has recently been used to explain the additional, yet often unrecognised, spaces that exist in higher education systems, systems traditionally divided into binary spaces: the academic space – occupied by lecturing and research staff – and the non-academic/support space – occupied by human resource staff, administrative and professional personnel, management and student support services (which include academic development and ALD) (Whitchurch, 2008). These two spaces should work together to support the overarching academic project, yet Clark (1998) describes the relationship between these two spaces as being in tension; the academic space often holds power at the centre and the support space may be relegated to the periphery.

The liminal space

A useful way of thinking about the third space in discussions about the complex positioning of ALPs is as a liminal space. This is especially true when bearing in mind the 'round hole, square peg' dynamic mentioned previously, and the fact that the liminal space, like the third space, is also an invisible 'site of struggle' (Law, 1992: 386) between centre and periphery. My use of the term 'liminal' in this article refers to being 'on a boundary or threshold, esp. by being … intermediate between two states, situations, etc.' (OED, n.d.). This is as opposed to the definition of liminal used by cultural anthropologists, social scientists and educators, which is closely tied to the idea of threshold concepts. In their understanding, liminal spaces are 'portals' or 'conceptual gateways' that lead to information or knowledge that is difficult to understand at first. The liminal in this article is thus not concerned with the transitional, but rather with the spatial. The liminal, as an in-between space, is a useful concept for this article because of the ways in which my South African ALP participants described their positioning: they used words such as 'difficult', 'strange' and 'weird', and they explained that they often feel as though they work in between the formal spaces available to them.

The liminal is thus a way of thinking through how ALPs understand their strange positioning, and how they navigate the betwixt and between. It is also a way of thinking through the extent to which ALPs reconstitute aspects of both the academic and the support spaces in an attempt to create a new space that is more representative of their 'ways of being' (Felt, 2009: 19), and their movements 'laterally across functional and organisational boundaries' (Whitchurch, 2008: 379). This article thus also seeks to explore how ALPs construct and reconstruct their professional identities while navigating the liminal. This research draws from a larger doctoral study (Joubert, 2023) that sought to investigate how ALPs in the South African higher education sector construct (and reconstruct) their identity in light of the structural and cultural forces that affect them.

Theoretical framework

This research uses Margaret Archer's (1995, 1996, 2000) social realist framework, which aims to explain the interplay between the social world and its social structures, cultural systems and agency (the self). Structures relate to physical material interests and resources, patterns in social behaviour, and the interplay between society and the distribution of material resources (Archer, 1996). They are a set of 'internally related objects' that can also form larger structures (Danermark et al., 2002: 178). Examples include social class, gender, marriage and education systems (Archer, 1995, 1996). The structures in this research include the contract types on which ALPs are appointed (which dictate their structural positioning), the support structures at institutions (for example, teaching and learning centres), and academic structures (institutional faculties, academic departments and so on).

Cultures, on the other hand, are formed by ideas, ideologies, beliefs, theories and values, which are viewed as accepted ways of doing things (Archer, 1996). Cultural systems can change over time due to shifts in knowledge systems, beliefs and literature (Archer, 1996), but such changes are often more difficult and slower to take effect than changes in structures. Both structures and cultures are relatively enduring, and they are the consequences of the activities of the people who came before us (Archer, 1995; Carter and New, 2004). We may thus not be responsible for a particular structure in the here and now, but rather for its maintenance, change or complete eradication (Archer, 1995). In terms of agency, Archer (2002: 19) recognises that people have 'The properties and powers to monitor their own life, to mediate structural and cultural properties of society, and thus to contribute to societal reproduction and transformation.' In other words, human beings have agency because they have 'intentionality', which is the capacity to think of projects and create strategies to pursue these projects (Archer, 1995: 198).

Archer (1995, 2000) argues that people form society through their actions (that is, agency), but that they are also shaped by society in turn (structure), meaning that the world consists of 'people' and 'parts'. To identify the interplay between the people (agency) and the parts (social structures or cultural systems), researchers can *analytically* separate structure, culture and agency through the application of analytical dualism (possible due to temporality, since structure and agency, and culture and agency, are phased over different periods) (Archer, 2000). Since structure and culture precede agency, they causally influence agency rather than determine agency. The temporal aspect of analytical dualism means that the current relations existing between agents, structures and cultures represent powers that emerged from interactions in prior sociocultural contexts.

In this article, the interplay between the centre (academic space) and the periphery (support space) largely plays out in what I call the 'structural positioning' and 'cultural positioning' of ALPs (see Joubert, 2023: Chapter 3). On the one hand, their structural positioning is based on the type of contract they are appointed on, and thus their label as either an academic or a support staff member. Their cultural positioning, on the other hand, is based on institutional perceptions of the kind of work they do. In other words, although a practitioner may be appointed on an academic contract, and thus be structurally positioned within the centre (the academic space), they can still be marginalised from the work being done in the centre by virtue of institutional perceptions of their ALD work as remedial and tangential to mainstream academic work – this is their cultural positioning.

The social realist framework is thus useful for this research because it provides a language with which to speak about the tension that may exist between an ALP's structural and cultural positioning. This is useful since there are multiple models of academic literacies provision, positioning and ways of working in South African higher education. At some institutions, for example, ALPs are structurally positioned in the centre – the academic space – by virtue of their titles, contract types and close proximity to a faculty. At other institutions, ALPs are structurally positioned in the periphery – the support space – also by

virtue of their titles, contract types and close proximity to the support space. There are also institutions where the structural positioning of ALD works is less clear; at these institutions, ALPs may be appointed on academic contracts, but they are physically and operationally positioned within the support space (Joubert, 2023). What complicates this picture of positioning, as mentioned earlier, is the still-prevalent 'remedial view' (Cottrell, 2019) of ALD work that may affect ALPs in terms of how they are culturally positioned on the periphery. The danger of this cultural positioning is that the work itself is sidelined, and seen as less important than mainstream content. ALPs may thus be seen as 'lesser' academics, or as academics concerned with a subject that is not legitimately 'academic', despite its integral role in student success.

Methodology

This research reflects on part of the findings of a recent doctoral study (Joubert, 2023) on how ALPs construct their professional identities in the South African higher education space. The research followed a mixed methods approach, and both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The research followed three phases: a questionnaire, a document analysis and semi-structured interviews. This article, however, will only focus on the qualitative data generated from two of the three phases: the online questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews.

The aim of the first phase of the research, the questionnaires, was to obtain a baseline understanding of what structures and cultures ALPs felt either enabled or constrained their ALD activities and the development of a professional identity. Maximum variation sampling was used, and a wide range of participants who relate to the aim of the study were selected to achieve a heterogeneous sample (Etikan et al., 2016; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). Every attempt was made to ensure that the participants represented a cross-cutting sample from traditional and comprehensive universities, as well as from universities of technology. (In general terms, traditional universities tend to be research-intensive, universities of technology focus on technology-based degrees, and comprehensive universities are a hybrid of both research and technology-based degrees [CHE, 2004].) In the end, however, most of the questionnaire participants were from traditional universities (89 of 96 participants). The data are thus skewed towards this type of institution and the ALPs who work there, but were still representative of various employment types, from contract/fixed term to tenured ALPs. The ALP participants also ranged in years of experience (from those who had been newly appointed to those with decades of experience) and degree backgrounds (from those with bachelor's degrees to those with doctoral degrees).

The aim of phase two, the semi-structured interviews, was to generate intensive data and to gain in-depth insight into the participants' experiences, feelings and knowledge of how they construct their professional identities in liminal spaces (Dörnyei, 2003; Patton, 2002). Interview participants were selected from the questionnaire. Questionnaire participants were asked to self-identify as potential interview participants, and those who identified themselves were then selected based on the level of their engagement with the questionnaire. An attempt was also made to obtain a mixed sample of employment type, years of experience and attitudes about the purpose of ALD. In total, 15 ALP participants were interviewed. The interviews took place in 2021, and they were completed online due to Covid-19 restrictions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Additionally, due to the voluntary nature of the research, most of the participants (n = 14) were from traditional universities. This article discusses the reflections of six interviewees in particular: Olivia, Scarlett, Willow, Elizabeth, Noah and Mary. I focus on these six since they responded in the most detail to questions about their professional identity development and about the various structural and cultural constraints and enablements that exist when working in in-between spaces. I also draw on some contributions made anonymously by the questionnaire participants. Some detail about these participants is provided in Table 1.

All the data generated from the open-ended parts of the questionnaire and from the interviews were coded. The first phase of coding involved developing descriptive codes to capture the vast array of topics and issues mentioned by the participants. The second phase required the application of interpretive codes to identify possible 'latent meanings' in the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 57), after which the third phase of coding commenced, and common themes and patterns were identified.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations included voluntary and confidential participation. Participants were not physically or psychologically harmed, and everything possible was done to protect their identity by limiting identifying remarks and using pseudonyms. No incentives or rewards were given to participants for taking part. Ethical clearance was first obtained from the researcher's home institution (UFS-HSD2021/0185/293), after which ethical clearance from each participating institution was also obtained.

Results and discussion

Due to limitations of space, this article will only focus on four themes that emerged from the data. The first theme deals with the tensions that exist in the liminal space, and how the ALP participants experience their positioning in their institutions. The second, third and fourth themes, discussed together, focus on how ALPs navigate what one participant called the 'strangeness' of the liminal space, specifically how they go about constructing a professional identity. Theme 2 discusses the importance of research as a way in which ALPs construct a professional identity. Theme 3 discusses the value of communities of practice in ALPs' construction of their professional identity, while theme 4 addresses the importance of collaboration in helping to establish the legitimacy of ALD in higher education.

The liminal space

When referring to how they are positioned within their institutions, several ALP participants reflected on the strangeness of the space they occupy. This strangeness seems to stem largely from their straddling both the centre and the periphery, without ever feeling as though they fully belong to either. Willow, for example, framed the liminal as 'weird', 'contested' and 'difficult'. She also commented on how perceptions of ALD at her institution are still informed by the historical underpinnings of the field:

> A lot of academic literacy programmes kind of started with this idea of helping students bridge the gap between university and school, especially because of the Bantu education system, etc. And I think because it has its roots in that … I think because it was always positioned in that kind of third contested space between academics and support … and then you have this weird third space as well. And that's where we operate from, it makes it very difficult, even if you are appointed as an academic position as an academic literacy practitioner. Because, at least in my experience, you're always in that space, you're not in the faculty, you're not in the programme.

Willow's comment about the influence of the past in determining the positioning of current ALPs is in keeping with Archer's (1995) argument that structures and cultures are enduring, and are the result of the actions of past ALPs. The origins of ALD still seem to contribute to the tension surrounding its positioning – that it is either positioned as a peripheral support service, or that it is positioned as a research-informed field that is central to student success. The enduring impact of the neoliberal turn in South African higher education, with its emphasis on student output, enrolment targets and effective skills development (Boughey, 2013), was acknowledged by several of the questionnaire and interview participants. One questionnaire participant, for example, stated that one of their biggest challenges was 'Resisting imposed institutional conceptions of academic literacy as a "second language problem"'. Data from the questionnaire responses show that 76 of the 96 respondents felt that faculty saw their unit/centre/department as a support service, while 72 also felt that management viewed ALD as remedial support work.

Notably, Willow described her space as 'weird', 'difficult' and 'contested', seemingly because it does not fit exactly within the familiar moulds of higher education (that is, into one of the two available/legitimate spaces). She, like many other participants, felt that although the work she does is integral to student success, it is often viewed as bolt-on or additional support that takes place tangentially to the main curriculum. In the excerpts below, Scarlett and Elizabeth spoke about the isolation of their units and the 'insider–outsider' identity that they take on because of this. In the first excerpt, Scarlett talked about her experience of existing, culturally, outside of traditional academic structures, even though she was structurally embedded within a faculty:

Table 1. Anonymised details about research participants

Pseudonym	Degree	Contract type	Job description	Experience level	Experience type	Positioning of academic literacies at institution	Type of institution
Olivia	PhD; also has honours in English as a second language	Academic	Senior Lecturer; Writing Centre lead	25+ years' experience	Experience in English for academic purposes, Writing Centre, staff development.	Centralised Writing Centre, servicing all faculties.	Traditional
Scarlett	PhD	Academic	Lecturer; teaches ALD modules	5 years	ALD course-type provision.	Faculty-embedded ALD support. Unit is attached to faculty.	Traditional
Willow	MA	Support	Academic skills coordinator	Unclear; about 7 years	Writing Centre and general ALD workshops.	Faculty-embedded ALD support. Unit is attached to faculty.	Traditional
Elizabeth	PhD	Academic (previously support)	Coordinator of postgraduate ALD	Over 20 years in the field	Consultations and general ALD workshops.	Faculty-embedded ALD support. Unit is attached to faculty.	Traditional
Noah	PhD	Academic	Lecturer; teaches ALD modules	About 22 years	ALD course provision.	ALD unit connected to faculty which services the entire university.	Traditional
Mary	PhD	Support	Coordinator of postgraduate ALD	12 years	Postgraduate Writing Centre; consultations and workshops.	Centralised Writing Centre, services all postgraduate students.	Traditional

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> that would be my biggest complaint is that sort of positioning inside but outside of everything. And I think sometimes that means that the students don't … they'll sort of sideline the course because they think, 'oh, well, you know, the other stuff is important. This is kind of an extra.'

Elizabeth also reflected on the insider–outsider dynamic within her institution:

> I think it does always depend on context. And, in this instance, I'm really pleased that I'm located in a particular faculty, although … I still feel positioned sort of in … outside. And there's that, you know, inside–outside dynamic that will come into play, in a way that it did previously when I was … centrally located and not in any of the faculties. So, I think it's quite hard to avoid that insider–outsider interplay.

It is this insider–outsider dynamic that represents the interplay between structural and cultural positioning playing out in the liminal space. Structurally, ALPs can be positioned either in the centre (as academic appointments) or on the periphery (as support appointments), but culturally, in terms of institutional beliefs, understandings and agendas, many seem to be positioned on the periphery. Explaining this interplay between structural and cultural positioning is useful, as it assists with better representing how the work of ALPs functions in practice. This kind of 'low visibility' or 'ambiguous cultural positioning' (Whitchurch, 2012: 115) can constrain an ALP's work activities. Scarlett, for example, previously reflected on how this cultural positioning has a constraining impact on her work:

> I think the fact that our courses are quite isolated … we're meant to be working with the other first-year people teaching students the other things … very often we're not. And because we're a unit over here, and then the department [over there] … we teach courses for the department … there's poor communication. So often we'll just not be told, 'oh, … your students didn't come to class because they were on a field trip. Didn't you know?' Or that kind of thing. So, poor communication about frustrating things like marks deadlines, '… and you missed the deadline', but you didn't tell me the deadline, you know, that kind of thing. So that can be very frustrating …

Scarlett's excerpt highlights the power that culture can have within an institution, as well as the role it can play in pushing an ALP towards the periphery, even when they may structurally occupy the centre. This ultimately results in the 'weird' or 'difficult' positioning of many ALPs in the liminal space, which is in keeping with Ding and Bruce's (2017: 107) argument that ALPs 'operate on the edges of academia'.

While skewed understandings of ALD can have a constraining impact on ALPs, an informed view can be enabling, especially when that understanding comes from those in positions of power. Both Elizabeth and Willow commented on how enabling it is when their line managers understand the remit of ALD:

> Having a line manager or management who understands what you're trying to do, I think that makes a big difference. And I've definitely felt that in my new position … So that I'm finding a very enabling factor. (Elizabeth)

> I have a fantastic line manager, he is very supportive. And he gives me a really good platform to talk about and push literacy into the courses themselves through the teaching and learning community and all of those types of things. (Willow)

Willow's reference to how her line manager provides her with a platform to 'talk about and push literacy into the courses' shows how she feels enabled to push ALD work from the periphery to the centre.

Identity construction in liminal spaces

Research

Many of the ALP participants in this research seem to construct and reconstruct their professional identities by underpinning their ALD work with research, and by building a research profile. By doing this, they both produce knowledge and display their understanding of the kinds of knowledge production that are valued by the centre (Brennan and Teichler, 2008; Felt and Fochler, 2012). Willow and Mary – both structurally positioned on the periphery by virtue of their professional service contracts – mentioned that

even though research output neither counts towards their promotion nor is built into their workloads, they still understand the importance of underpinning their practices with research and producing research. Doing so has become a way in which they enact an identity that is mostly in keeping with how they identify professionally. Noah, who was structurally positioned in the centre (he was an academic appointment), was expected to publish research. Interestingly, he also commented that his production of research goes beyond his contractual obligations. Rather, it has enabled him to affirm his professional identity, especially while being culturally positioned on the periphery and inhabiting the liminal space. One might think that by being structurally positioned in the centre, his sense of institutional legitimacy might have been by default, but, as he highlighted, research, and the publishing thereof, have enabled him to change the internal perceptions of his role. Specifically, he said that his research endeavours are one way in which he '[found] alternative spaces to validate [him]self', and by which he 'increased [his] self-esteem as an academic literacy practitioner'. He clearly understood that by producing similar forms of knowledge in ways that are valued by the centre, academic literacies knowledge may be increasingly understood as valid 'sets of knowledge':

> But the point that I wanted to get to is, what has changed the perception internally is engaging in research, and publishing and interacting with faculties because that is when they see wow, you know, these people aren't just editors, or, you know, high-school English teachers, these people are actually linguists coming with their own sets of knowledge, these people are actually critically analysing the ways that we use language in our disciplines.

In doing, and publishing, their research, these ALPs feel that they contribute to the field of ALD more broadly and ensure that their teaching is research informed. It also enables them to speak back to their *cultural* positioning on the periphery and legitimise the work they do. Indeed, research plays an integral role in reward structures, in symbolic recognition, and in overall prestige within the academic centre. It also enables academics to achieve a distinctive academic identity (Clarke et al., 2013; Henkel, 2005; Macfarlane, 2010). As Becher and Trowler (2001) have highlighted, the professional language and literature of a discipline, enacted through the publishing of research, establishes a clear sense of cultural/academic identity.

Communities of practice

The second way in which ALPs seem to construct a professional identity in the liminal space is through the formation of ALD communities of practice (COPs). The ALPs in this study felt that the development of strong COPs enabled them to strengthen the legitimacy of their ALD work by sharing best practices, as well as scholarship. A COP, according to Wenger (1998: 2), is a group of people who are 'informally bound by what they do together … and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities'. COPs seem to be important in providing ALPs with a space that is collegial and supportive, particularly in institutions where there are only a few ALPs responsible for multiple faculties or student cohorts. (For example, Elizabeth was responsible for an entire faculty's postgraduate students, and Mary for her entire institution's postgraduate cohort).

Academic literacies COPs can take various forms, from academic literacies-specific COPs to teaching and learning COPs more generally. They can be local or international. The interview participants spoke a lot about the value of their COPs, and how these COPs have helped them experience a greater sense of belonging to their institutions, and also a sense of agency and identity. Willow spoke about how her COPs provide her with a sense of belonging to a larger network of ALD or academic development professionals, even though she was the sole ALP in her faculty. These kinds of 'strong relationships' with other ALPs seem to provide the participants with the social and cultural capital necessary to enable forward movement in the field of ALD: 'So, because I'm the only one doing it … but I do have … strong relationships with other, I guess, writing or rather writing practitioners within the university … so they always support each other' (Willow).

Scarlett also mentioned that the small COP she had with the Writing Centre at her institution acted in an enabling way, which again alludes to the social and cultural capital that such networks afforded her: 'So, we get support [from the institution's writing programme] and the [institution's] writing programme concretises that support in quite a useful way. So that is quite enabling.' Interestingly, Scarlett was initially rather reluctant to adopt a professional ALP identity due to its cultural positioning at her institution. However, through the support she received from her COP, she felt enabled to do

this. Her comment that the COP 'concretised' support in a 'useful way' alludes to the increased sense of agency she acquired through her COPs. Previous research has shown similar results. Taylor (1989: 36), for example, speaks about how 'a defining community' can play a role in the construction of a professional identity. Sweitzer (2009) found that within higher education, a professional's networks influence job satisfaction and attainment, as well as overall career-related success, and Ibarra et al. (2005: 362) have shown that professional networks such as COPs serve as 'identity-construction mechanisms' (see also Dobrow and Higgins, 2005). Collective networks, in other words, provide individuals with social capital, which is defined as 'social relations and resource advantages' (Ibarra et al., 2005: 360).

Collaboration

This sense of community extends beyond ALD COPs, and may include other academics or support professionals who are passionate about literacy and teaching and learning issues. Whitchurch (2009: 409) calls this building authority 'in situ, via day-to-day activity and relationships with colleagues', rather than through an ALP's positioning in organisational hierarchies. Olivia, for example, mentioned that she viewed her connections and collaborations with other lecturers as a form of COP. Willow, too, talked about how enabling it was to link up with different spaces in different ways:

> But then I also see my relationship with the lecturers that I've developed relationships with through assisting with academic literacies development work with their students, you know, I also see that as part of a, in a sense, a community that I belong to as well. (Olivia)

> So, my position is a little bit strange, different compared to other practitioners, so I link in different spaces in different ways. And that has actually helped me. (Willow)

These kinds of collaborations with others and with other spaces in both the centre and periphery are a significant feature of the liminal space, which, by its nature, seems to be a markedly social space. While COPs seem to play a role in the development of ALPs' expertise, skills and knowledge, collaborations (especially with academics in the centre) are a way to promote ALD work, concretise an ALP's professional identity as an expert in the field of ALD, and conscientise other academic staff to the complexity of literacies development. Willow, for example, mentioned the importance of collaboration with other academics in assisting ALPs to gain greater status, a sense of professionalism, and legitimacy. However, she specified that the partnership must be an equal one in which the expertise of ALPs is valued:

> And if we can build strong relationships … with lecturers in that regard, I can see a very nice … pathway of being academic literacy practitioners in higher education in that professional sense. But it has to be a joint and more equal membership or relationship between literacy practitioners and academic staff for this to have that positive effect. (Willow)

Collaboration, therefore, is a significant expectation of the liminal space, which could lead to collaborative knowledge production, clarification of the expectations of ALPs, and the amplification of shared values and qualities. I argue that it is through collaboration that ALPs are able to *do* their ALD work. It is one way to gain access to multiple disciplines and their discourse requirements, and it enables ALPs to promote the legitimacy of their expertise, and thus also strengthen their sense of professional identity.

Conclusions

The value of this research lies in its attempt to examine how ALPs negotiate professional identity construction when they oscillate between the centre and the periphery, thus occupying the complex, liminal third space. Doing formal research, forming COPs and working collaboratively are activities that seem to assist ALPs in forming a professional identity in this complex, in-between space. The liminal space is a 'both/and' space in which aspects of both the academic and support spaces are reconstituted for the purposes of ALD and academic development more broadly; it is also a space in which the tensions between an ALP's structural and cultural positionings play out. It is important to better understand this space, as it can affect how ALPs perceive their positioning and their sense of belonging within their institutions, as well as the way ALD is practised.

Recognising and validating the existence of the liminal is an empowering step, and a way to more visibly problematise the constraints of the current 'common-sense discourses' that hold sway in academia, which create binaries that do not really work, or that position ALPs and academic developers in limiting ways. Challenging common-sense (mis)understandings of ALD is also vital in addressing the dire need for transformation in South African higher education (Quinn, 2012). Not doing so risks pushing the field and its practitioners further away from the centre, making it more susceptible to sub-degree or 'pre-university work' status, as well as outsourcing, and thus to the possible denigration of expertise (Fulcher, 2009: 139). In other words, the *structural* positioning of ALPs is perhaps less important than their cultural positioning, since institutional understandings/perceptions of the aim and value of the work seem to be the more powerful forces in driving ALD work into the centre or the periphery.

A lack of shared meanings about the ALP role, positioning and identity can also impede the professional development of practitioners themselves, as well as the field in general (Quinn and Vorster, 2014). When ALPs feel marginalised, they may become frustrated by the lack of impact that they feel they can have on teaching and learning, and when they move closer to the centre, they may 'fall victim to the vicissitudes of strategic planning and the changing vision and priorities of those in dominant positions, with the result that their own key objectives are constantly shifting' (Leibowitz, 2014: 358). Clarifying what the liminal space is, who occupies it, what their role is in the institution, and, very importantly, formalising this space, may provide those who occupy it with the necessary cultural capital to 'exert influence in academia and to occupy a less marginal and vulnerable – disposable – position' (Ding and Bruce, 2017: 161).

Finally, echoing what Whitchurch (2010: 639) has argued, this research has shown that ALPs need to work with various staff in their institutions, continuously and intentionally, to act in ways that 'reinforce and indeed enrich each other'. To achieve this reinforcement, however, it is evident that further conceptual shifts need to take place within the higher education space, especially since the shape and requirements of the current academic literacies contexts have drastically changed since the 1980s. In other words, it is time for a different set of structures and cultures.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of the Free State ethics board, reference number UFS-HSD2021/0185/293. Ethical clearance was also obtained from all the participating institutions.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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