London Review of Education

LONDON REVIEW OF EDUCATION

UCLPRESS

Special issue: ***Third space roles and identities in educational settings***

Research article

Ecological dynamics in the third space: a diffractive analysis of academic development

Ian Kinchin,[1,*] Suzie Pugh[2]

[1] Surrey Institute of Education, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK
[2] Swansea Academy of Learning and Teaching, Swansea University, UK
* Correspondence: i.kinchin@surrey.ac.uk

Submission date: 1 December 2023; Acceptance date: 22 March 2024; Publication date: 22 May 2024

How to cite
Kinchin, I. and Pugh, S. (2024) 'Ecological dynamics in the third space: a diffractive analysis of academic development'. *London Review of Education*, 22 (1), 17.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.22.1.17.

Peer review
This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Abstract

In this article, we conceptualise the maintenance and evolution of third space practice using an ecological heuristic. This considers the dynamic balance between stabilising and destabilising processes that require third space practitioners (particularly academic developers) to be active curators of this space. These processes drive the phases of the adaptive cycle as it evolves from an epistemologically singular perspective towards one that accommodates epistemological plurality. A pictorial representation of the ecological dynamics is offered as a frame to support the construction of a personal professional narrative. This provides an exemplar of reflection on practice, and highlights the need for epistemic humility within this professional arena.

Keywords adaptive cycle; ecological university; epistemological plurality; professional development

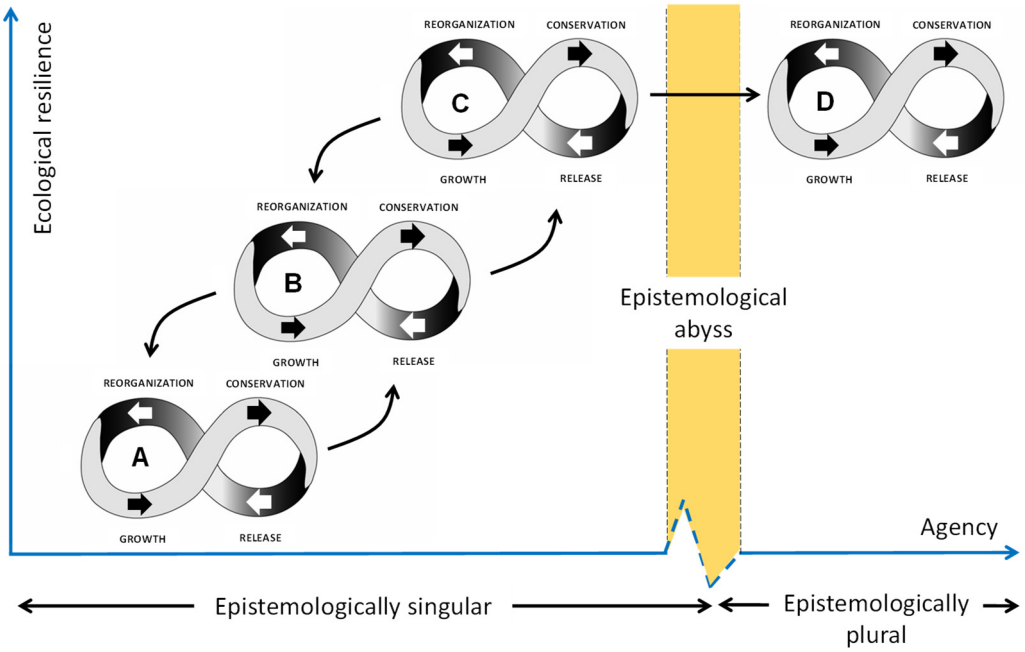
Introduction

In this article, we explore the ways in which the conduct of academic developers within universities is conceptualised as the activities of inhabitants of a particular niche within the academic community – the third space. By utilising ecological metaphors, we can better articulate the dynamic and interconnected nature of the activities of colleagues within this space and start to appreciate the complexity of the relational nature of their work. This avoids the reductive, linear descriptors that are used within the neoliberal university to emphasise industrial imperatives, such as efficiency and productivity, and adopts a systems thinking approach (Capra and Luisi, 2014) that better aligns the university to the wicked problems that characterise the current century (Lönngren and Van Poeck, 2021). Underpinning this article is the assumption that the nature of the so-called 'third space' (Whitchurch, 2008) will inevitably change as the wider university ecosystem evolves. The structure and function of the third space in the neoliberal university will be different from that which might be observed in institutions that are moving towards becoming an ecological university, in which the industrial root metaphors of progress, anthropocentrism and individualism are replaced with an emphasis on connectivity, care and sustainability (explored in detail by Kinchin, 2023, 2024). Whereas the third space might be seen as a passive place of refuge for flexible generalists in the neoliberal university (Stanton and Young, 2022), the dynamic and relational nature of the ecological university means that third space activities will be influential and impactful in making connections with various discourses (policy, teaching and learning, research and so on), and across epistemological divides between, for example, those educational researchers who are increasingly guided by feminist and ecological social imaginaries of knowledge making and those managers who see their job as enacting change based on quantitative data founded on representational epistemologies (Doucet, 2021). These third space practitioners need to be reconsidered as specialists who are able to actively fashion a third space in which we focus particularly on the constitutive and intra-active quality of the relationships that are forged, and which influence the 'institutional natural history' (Kinchin, 2022a). The need for epistemological plurality is an explicit assumption within this work, and it is seen as a key characteristic of practice in the third space (Kinchin and Pugh, 2024), facilitating connections between disciplinary boundaries and across the policy–practice divide.

The ongoing processes of change within the ecological university can be described with reference to the adaptive cycle – a heuristic that emphasises the dynamic nature of social-ecological systems (Kinchin, 2022a). This same heuristic can be applied to those working within the third space, helping to generate a coherent picture of change across the entire institution. In this article, the narrative of change is explored through analysis of the reflective comments of a senior academic developer; a process that offers a methodological exemplar. Elements of this narrative are aligned with phases of the adaptive cycle to highlight points of 'release', 'reorganisation', 'growth' and 'conservation' (indicated on the cycles in Figure 1) to illustrate the descriptive power of this tool and the way in which developmental connections can be related to the university ecosystem. The reorganisation phase of the cycle covers a rapid period of assembly of system components that occurs after a disruption to the system, and it is an opportunity for innovation. It is this phase, during the recombination of the university ecosystem, where efforts made to transform practice are likely to have the most impact – where academic developers might have most influence on the practice of others, while also developing their own practice. In contrast, the conservation phase is a relatively slow-moving phase of consolidation and accumulation of assets that occurs during periods of relative environmental stability. During this phase, practices and habits within the university will become sedimented, and change will be more difficult to initiate as colleagues are reluctant to spend time adjusting a system that appears to be working just fine. At this time, there is an appearance of stability, even if this stability is an illusion supported by a selective focus on those factors within the environment that we believe are fixed for the long term (Schön, 1971). Overall, the cyclic heuristic provides a fundamental unit of study that contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of complex systems (Holling, 2001; Sundstrom and Allen, 2019). In the fore loop, connectedness is increased, and capital accumulated, during the relatively slow sequence from growth to conservation. In the back loop, the system unravels quickly, resources are released and there is creative potential to explore innovations within the system. As such, it can be seen that destabilising factors generally act more quickly than stabilising factors, and this needs to be acknowledged within the realms of staff development. An appreciation of the current phase of a particular adaptive cycle may help academic developers to facilitate appropriate responses to staff development needs and to target efforts at points when they may have most impact (Kinchin, 2022c). These phases may not always be easy to identify,

except where a major disturbance (such as was experienced during Covid-19 lockdowns) completely disrupts practice – signifying the release phase of the adaptive cycle. Other disruptions may be more subtle and/or more personal in their influence, but no less significant for those who are impacted.

Figure 1. Interconnected adaptive cycles representing plateaus in academic development: A = cycle of dependence; B = transitory cycle; C = cycle of independence. The fourth cycle (D) represents the additional stage in professional development required for academic developers, moving from an epistemologically singular perspective to epistemological plurality (Source: Kinchin and Pugh, 2024: 143)



Those working in the third space might be considered as academic artisans (Brew et al., 2018), honing their practice in an environment that traverses professional and academic spheres and serves for collaboratively shaping diversity and occasionally intersecting professional identities (Veles et al., 2023). In the neoliberal university, they have been described as flexible generalists (Stanton and Young, 2022) and in the ecological university as institutional natural historians (Kinchin, 2024), whose tentacular reach across the university ecosystem brings them into contact with colleagues from the range of academic disciplines – as well as with administrators and managers. The complex route from the solidity of the academic disciplines to the fluidity of academic development has been described by Kinchin and Pugh (2024) in terms of a transition from epistemological singularity (that defines most disciplines) to epistemological pluralism (that is a defining characteristic of academic development). This challenging process requires individuals to exercise various narrative approaches to establish their credibility across diverse contexts and in connection with different audiences. For example, difficulties are routinely encountered by academic developers when engaging in novel activity domains, embarking on new projects, or addressing university priorities situated beyond or in the transitional spaces between conventional areas (Veles et al., 2023).

A diffractive approach

Individuals operating within the third space are accustomed to encountering the tensions that occur between different sections of the university community, often acting as a buffer between institutional actions and professional values. Within the neoliberal university, these borderlands may be viewed as areas where other narratives are excluded – acting as a dividing line between academic tribes. We propose that in an ecological university, these regions of contact may be rather more productive. They

may act as zones of interaction where counter-narratives can test and challenge the prevailing grand narrative, and where an epistemological consilience may emerge (as discussed by Kinchin, 2024). For example, the nature and purpose of research is a key point of tension, where some disciplines employ representational epistemology and others a non-representational epistemology (Kinchin, 2024). This is manifested in different approaches to research and different ways of considering evidence. On the one hand, there is a need for research findings that can be applied to practice or policy development in order for them to be seen as relevant, evidence-based and able to reflect the social world. Such a research approach is often justified by reference to terms such as 'rigorous' and 'scientific'. On the other hand, a range of critical, poststructuralist, feminist and new materialist commentators have questioned the capacity of social inquiry to accurately 'represent' the world that it claims to study (for example, St. Pierre, 2014). A repeated traversing of the epistemological plane between these two world views is one of the defining characteristics of ecological thinking (Doucet, 2021), and it is needed to help move the contemporary university away from the dominant discourses of neoliberalism towards a sustainable, ecological model (Kinchin, 2023). This epistemological difference between perspectives can also be seen in the application of diffraction or reflection as guiding principles for research (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2017). Wang and Roulston (2007) have argued that when performing thematic analysis – searching for similarities – researchers often only reflect on participant responses that confirm initial assumptions about the social system, while failing to account for how researchers were actively contributing to the production of data. Bozalek and Zembylas (2017: 124) describe diffraction as 'a tool of analysis, for attentive and detailed reading of a text intra-actively through another for the consequential differences that matter'. Founded on the work of Barad (2007), diffractive analysis is a way to map where the effects of difference appear, by reading data through other sources, including personal experiences, other texts and thinking with theory (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013), and in which the observer is very much part of the phenomenon under investigation (Lenz Taguchi, 2013).

The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–1 heightened sensitivities to many of the issues on campus, caused adjustments to staff priorities and increased the visibility of many of the points of potential conflict between different staff groups. In the peri-Covid university, digital technology has become a significant co-participant in all our interactions, as face-to-face teaching was temporarily abandoned to maintain institutional teaching commitments. Emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020) was therefore a key part of the university experience for many students and teachers between 2020 and 2021, and online delivery continues to play a role in the emerging 'new normal' of university teaching (Plotnikof and Utoft, 2021). This work, therefore, fits with the concept of developing a minor pedagogy (Mazzei and Smithers, 2020), in which the folding of posthumanism (Dedeoğlu and Zampaki, 2023) and ecological theory (Kinchin, 2023) entangles with the evidence of experience recorded within personal narratives, alongside the formal narratives expressed in university teaching strategy documents (Kinchin, 2022b). These overlaps are highlighted in the definition of posthumanism offered by Dedeoğlu and Zampaki (2023: 51): 'A praxis of and for the posthuman that aims to decenter the human, decipher hegemonic power relations, undo injustices, and affirmatively contribute to sustainable ways of living together in this world, taking inspiration from diverse philosophical, scientific and artistic traditions, as well as Indigenous worldviews.'

In a number of studies, the mapping of difference in professional identities of third space practitioners has previously been undertaken using the visual tool of concept mapping (for example, Balloo et al., 2023; Kinchin and Winstone, 2018). This approach gives a detailed and nuanced representation of the links between key elements of practice and acknowledges complexity by avoiding the reductionist consequences of thematic analysis. It also encourages participants to explore links between elements in their profile that may have previously been widely invisible. This enhanced perspective allows third space practitioners to 'function as a canary in the neo-liberalised workspace' (Balloo et al., 2023: 11), so that academic developers can enable and prepare other academics in their own recognition of institutional pathologies. However, the concept maps can render a static depiction of being, from which any interpretations of becoming have to be based on assumptions made about the maps, which need to be verified by further dialogue with the participants to interrogate the map structure (Heron et al., 2018). Without this further interrogation of meaning, there is a danger that the pathological perspective is seen as the dominant state of being, rather than as a lens in the dynamic process of becoming. In this way, consideration of institutional pathology becomes a valuable tool to highlight the conditions of healthy experience (Carel, 2021; Ljungdalh, 2020).

Here we bypass that interpretive process by adopting an autoethnographic lens in which the participant directly interrogates their own perspective through refractive engagement with ecological theory. This has been undertaken as a form of collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013), where the two authors have become entangled in each other's narrative. Rather than using mapping tools, we have opted to use narrative as the 'ultimate device' for dealing with complexity, where 'the observer's knowledge and understanding is constructed by interaction with experience [that] is laid out in a narrative. Narratives are not about the verity of a situation, but are rather an explicit statement of what the narrator views as important' (Zellmer et al., 2006: 172).

Code (2006: 41) uses the term 'spectator epistemologies' to describe those academic fields that separate the knower from discrete objects of knowledge (as in the natural sciences, where the observer is removed from the subjects of observation), rather than an ecological perspective in which the observer is recognised as part of the system being observed – as is the case with teacher development. Here we set out to trace the epistemological development of an academic through the stages of academic dependence (Figure 1, Cycle A) towards greater academic independence (Figure 1, Cycle C), which is characterised by greater agency and ecological resilience (explored by Kinchin, 2022c). We then suggest an additional step that is required by academic developers and other third space practitioners that will enable them to move from academic independence within their home discipline (that is, an epistemologically singular stance represented by Cycle C in Figure 1) towards a plateau of development that supports active curation of the third space, exemplified by a conscious level of epistemological plurality (Figure 1, Cycle D), crossing the so-called epistemological abyss (Santos, 2014) that divides 'academic knowledge' from other Indigenous and cultural knowledges.

Framed narrative

To explore the theoretical perspectives outlined above, we have divided Suzie Pugh (SP)'s framed narrative into sections below, where she has related some of her comments to the model in Figure 1. Transition from one phase of the adaptive cycle to the next is not simple, linear or 'clean', and the phases lack discrete boundaries. Movements are influenced by numerous factors within the wider university assemblage (Bacevic, 2019). Different phases of the adaptive cycle (indicated on the cycles in Figure 1) develop at different rates and persist for different lengths of time (Kinchin, 2022a). Sections of SP's narrative (indicated below by indented text) are used to illustrate points along this journey – starting with a 'leap in the dark', that represents the release phase of the dependent cycle (Figure 1). These narrative sections are then interpreted by Ian Kinchin (IK) in the form of an asynchronous dialogue. The following narrative section is situated within plateaus A and B of the adaptive journey. It highlights the transitionary experience of an expert teacher, whose values, experience and responsibilities formed a solid professional identity, to a novice practitioner, where the role expectations and cultural dynamics were unfamiliar and complex.

> My departure from a decade in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) as a Senior Lecturer (final year as Principal Lecturer), to a Senior Academic Developer was a leap in the dark. I had established a strong professional identity in ITE with a confident grasp of my role and my abilities. I viewed myself as an 'expert teacher', and progressed in leadership roles from Programme Director to Head of Professional Development. During the latter role, teaching activity diminished, to be replaced with management and administration responsibilities. This was a catalyst for change, so I moved to a new institution into my current role of Senior Academic Developer. (SP's reflections)

The identity of the 'expert teacher' mentioned above is in line with the dominant discourses of teaching excellence. We find that 'expertise' is a term that is often framed from within an epistemic community, and which perhaps has more to do with the perceived knowledge base of an individual (content knowledge) and less to do with their teaching ability (pedagogical content knowledge). For example, Wieman (2019) talks about teaching expertise, but employs a perspective that is entirely constrained by a singular epistemological stance – the so-called medical or evidence-based model. Wieman's (2019) singular epistemological gaze leads him to overlook the inherent weaknesses of that model (explored by Biesta and Van Braak, 2020). In addition, as SP's identity as a teacher became subsumed by her increasing role as a leader, it is possible that she felt increasingly distanced from pedagogical practice. For example,

nurturing relationships with students, cultivating learning environments and valuing everyday practice had seemingly lost their relevance. This impacted on her sense of belonging as she questioned her personal space, surroundings and social interactions (ideas explored by Gravett and Ajjawi, 2022).

> Transitioning from a teaching-led institution to a research-led university (in which 'epistemic fragility' [described by Skopec et al. (2021)], is likely to be a strong element of the culture), while changing roles, was a multifaceted process comprising complex environmental, relational and personal intersections. Navigating this transition involved significant emotional and cognitive investment, particularly as I had never worked with an academic developer nor fully understood the role. It was so much more than simply understanding roles and responsibilities (Fortune et al., 2016). A key aspect for me was to 'tune in' to the regulative discourse of my new institution to decipher its values and expectations. This also involved, most importantly, gauging the level of contentment and enthusiasm exhibited among colleagues and, though somewhat superficial, gain a general sense of the working culture which I perceived as creative and energising. (SP's reflections)

This 'tuning in' is a complex process for the academic developer, as the discourses across the campus form a heterogeneous patchwork across the disciplines. For example, physical scientists tend to have a very clear perspective on what is permissible within their disciplinary narrative regarding what is 'correct' or 'approved', as they search for a universal truth. In contrast, within the performing arts, the lack of a 'verifiable truth' is a celebrated feature of the field. In such an environment, the third space may offer a 'narrative garden' (Gabriel, 2016) – a safe space for exploration and innovation where a regulative discourse can be nurtured to support the needs of third space practitioners (for example, Kinchin et al., 2018).

> Initially, during the first year of my role, I viewed myself as a novice, undervaluing my past experience of 20 years working in education. I adopted short-term survival strategies, accepting the 'dominant wisdom' of my department, aligning my actions to peers in a work environment and culture of which I had little previous experience. I felt compelled to convey a 'credible image' long before I had 'fully internalized the underlying professional identity' (Ibarra, 1999: 765). This 'credible image' also served as a temporary professional identity, regarded by Ibarra (1999) as 'provisional self'. I observed the behaviour of role models, and built relationships with colleagues who held similar values to me (Plateau A). Since that time, I have become familiar with Little and Green's (2022) credibility framework in educational development, which serves as a useful tool to unravel some of the credibility issues I was experiencing. The framework identifies three broad areas: trustworthiness, expertise and identification.
>
> I knew that establishing strong working relationships would take time and personal investment, and I was comfortable pursuing this aspect of my role. However, there were a number of constraints that I had not anticipated. A key challenge for me during the early stages of my role, teaching on the PGCert, was building trust with participants and finding 'common pedagogic ground', as many academics perceived my role as one of technical support. Changing perceptions was challenging, and I felt the absence of epistemological plurality (Plateau D) particularly acute in my first few years in post.
>
> Although I have 25 years' experience working in education, as I had not studied at doctoral level, my 'expertise' felt limited [despite significant experience] which, during the early years in post, eroded my confidence. This was due to the shift from a teaching-led to a research-led university, coupled with a skeletal research profile. (SP's reflections)

SP's comments about expertise appear to be positioned within a philosophy of 'being' rather than one of 'becoming' (as discussed by Strom and Martin, 2017), with the implicit expectation that an academic developer will be expert, while those academics who are on development programmes are explicitly becoming, in a perpetual, dynamic state of transition (Guyotte et al., 2021). This contradiction between professional being and becoming is recognised as a source of pedagogic frailty (Kinchin and Gravett, 2022), in which innovation and professional development are likely to be impeded. This presents a major obstacle for third space practitioners, which needs to be identified and accommodated.

The work I had undertaken in ITE, and my leadership experience, provided a temporary identity for me, as I was comfortable with a university working culture. However, I had lost my 'academic mindset', as it seemed no longer valid. At the time, I questioned how I could flourish and have credibility in a research-led university, when I rarely taught and was inactive in any research. My role had become that of a broker, straddling disciplines and raising engagement with pedagogy. I felt the pressure of moving into Plateau D, epistemological plurality, but without the perceived credentials. Beginning a PhD bolstered my sense of credibility and growing confidence. This relates to Healy's (2003: 700) comments: 'Expert culture is currently a bastion of "epistemic sovereignty" that impedes not only non-expert involvement in knowledge creation [of the sort promoted by the students-as-partners movement] but also the development of the inter- and trans-disciplinarity "epistemological pluralism" requires.' My decision making as an individual was encouraged and valued (Plateau B), and I grew to realise the culture of academic development as being open to 'new' knowledges, networked and collegial (Guerin, 2013). Before embarking on a PhD, I began a small-scale study, exploring the emerging teacher identities of early career academics (ECAs) in the transition from research, practice and industry. I wanted to build an expertise in the 'discipline' of academic development, while demonstrating a commitment to lifelong learning and an openness to new knowledge. I began to experience the dynamic process of research, which impacted my growing professional identity and role in the department – one that was not confined to technology-enhanced learning.

However, at this time, I can see that I was working towards Plateau C, but had not reached independence. For example, during a PGCert session, I was challenged by an ECA over the legitimacy of pedagogical research. I felt ill-equipped to counterargue, as I had not been in that position before. In my previous role as a lecturer in ITE, the majority of students did not have such an epistemologically singular perspective or such inflexible opinions. I was now interacting with academic staff who had established expertise in their field, and perhaps lacked the experience of a more heterogeneous research culture (Plateau D) [that is, the more 'expert' the more entrenched academics were in a singular epistemic perspective]. Now, upon reflection, I wonder if the confrontation with the ECA exemplifies Skopec et al.'s (2021: 3) observation that such clashes occur in 'epistemic communities, when core principles of STEMM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine] (objectivity, meritocracy, authority and centrality) are challenged'. This may have been due to me introducing research that was 'outside of the hegemonic academic canon' (Skopec et al., 2021: 3), but perhaps also due to my perceived lack of agency.

As my professional identity became more established, I started to sense a tension between some academic staff and the role of academic development. I (wrongly) perceived my team culture as one that emphasised the complexity of trivial technology-enhanced learning (TEL) approaches, while academics trivialised the complexity of teaching. I have come to appreciate this apparent conflict as being due to both groups existing as separate epistemic communities [Figure 1]. Although it is a strength of each community, sharing the same world view, on a face-to-face level, this boundary (particularly when it remains unrecognised) can be detrimental to healthy pedagogic discourse. There can be an impasse with an intellectual elitism associated with natural sciences, rejecting other forms of inquiry as 'pseudoscience' (Gieryn, 1983). For example, ECAs unfamiliar with pedagogy uphold the core principle of objectivity, and therefore struggle to value the highly subjective nature of some pedagogic research, viewing it through the 'wrong' [a singular] epistemological lens [Cycle C].

It is important for me to make some comparisons between my previous role as mentor and my current evolution as an academic mentor. As a Programme Director, I was responsible for building an employment-based ITE programme from the ground. I engaged stakeholders from the outset, meeting with head teachers from a range of schools. It was imperative for me to capture their views and experiences to design a suitable training programme that would lead to Qualified Teaching Status (QTS). At the time, I was unaware of the co-construction concept, and acted on my gut feeling to build a community and draw the best out of each member. The result was a well-structured programme with regular meetings between the student, school mentor and university tutor. As the programme grew, training mentors

became an integral part of my role. My ethos, which permeated all liaison with schools, was based on professional trust. I was proud of the successful working relationships I had developed by refusing to adopt a deficit model with challenging schools. Affording agency for stakeholders was paramount, as I wanted to cultivate a programme that reflected a salutogenic philosophy.

My experience of mentoring in my current role as an academic developer teaching on the PGCert is quite different. I no longer hold the responsibility for a programme, which has changed my perspective and approach to my practice. For example, I perceived my previous role as having more agency as I was accountable to the Welsh Government, as well as to the institution. I certainly exhibited 'authority' in my role, due to the responsibility and accountability. Now, although I am still engaged with mentoring, it is with a more pastoral, supportive approach. I view this 'authority' as having shifted towards a burgeoning pedagogic specialist – a compelling dynamic that I now describe as a process of evolving. Figure 1 has served as an invaluable device for making sense of a complex career change, enabling me to conceptualise and articulate the process in cycles. By far the most significant and effective cycle has been D, in moving my thinking on and impacting my daily practice. At the risk of simplification, I now acknowledge and embrace the existence of multiple, equally valid ways of knowing and understanding the world, and am equipped to counteract any views to the contrary. (SP's reflections)

Discussion

Looking back at our careers as third space practitioners working in academic development, both authors are able to reflect on our progress through Cycles A to D (Figure 1) as we developed increasing agency and resilience in our work. We can also recognise various disruptions to professional practice that initiated release phases in the adaptive cycles. Some of these were shared experiences (including the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–1), while others were personal experiences that would not have been experienced by colleagues working in the same space (for example, moving from ITE to academic development). However, even in the shared encounters, the experiences were not homogeneous. For example, the experiences of colleagues during Covid-19 were very mixed. Some colleagues thrived during lockdown, and were given the time and space to concentrate on numerous projects that would otherwise have been crowded out. Other colleagues found lockdown to be a painful experience, a blurring of distinctions between work and family life, and the imposition of a debilitating isolation from colleagues. In other words, some colleagues were able to complete the adaptive cycle relatively quickly, and to re-establish a new 'conservation phase' of the cycle – a 'new normal', while others found the 'reorganisation' phase of the cycle to be a sticking point, with continual uncertainty, causing added stress to their workload. Revealing the personal reasons for colleagues to be trapped in the reorganisation phase of the cycle requires an understanding of their place in the institutional natural history, whether they are in a dependent, transitory or independent cycle (Cycles A–C in Figure 1), and the links available to individual staff members to help them progress beyond the 'change trap' (Kinchin, 2024: 86). This is where the support of third space practitioners can be vital.

Other colleagues will have experienced different, idiosyncratic release phases of their own, some major and some minor. For example, colleagues who relocate from overseas may find the transition to the UK system to be traumatic, creating major personal and professional issues that may take months or years to resolve (Hosein et al., 2018). More minor challenges might be initiated by the launch of a new IT system or a change in academic regulations. Such challenges will run concurrently, and will be overlayed one on top of another to create a complex teaching assemblage that includes numerous adaptive cycles operating at different scales. The application of the adaptive cycle offers a tool to consider this overwhelming complexity. By concentrating on the core dynamic processes of stabilisation and destabilisation, it reduces the complexity to a manageable level without trivialising the narrative.

Within a department, there will be a patchwork of challenges, some personal and some shared. An appreciation of the complexity of this professional landscape requires a deep understanding of the institutional natural history, which will be different for each university. It should also be noted that the professional development trajectory summarised in Figure 1 is not restricted to early career academics, or to those who have experienced a major 'release event'. Senior academics, even those who feel that

they have traversed the epistemological abyss, will still be travelling through their own adaptive cycles – still becoming. Commenting on his own recent experiences, IK has remarked on the latest phase of his development, in assuming emeritus status, within the non-linear ecological perspective illustrated by the adaptive cycle: 'As someone working at the end of their career, I find it refreshing to reconsider my learning using the Deleuzian configuration of the rhizome. It is liberating to know that I am not at the end of the road but still "in the middle"' (Kinchin, 2024: 129–30).

Conclusions

SP has been able to use Figure 1 as a supportive frame, helping her to move beyond a descriptive, simplistic, linear chronology in her professional narrative. She has interwoven the ecological frame within her professional experience to depict her evolution as a third space practitioner, from an epistemologically singular perspective towards one of increasing plurality – a rhizomatic transition of continual becoming. The role of the academic developer within the typical neoliberal university is complex. Typically, academic developers are not seen as star researchers or award-winning teachers on campus, and their work is often overlooked by the dominant metrics that are used to assess academic excellence. Academic developers may, therefore, be seen to inhabit the 'in-between spaces', with the cohort of colleagues identified by Brew et al. (2018) as academic artisans. Their understanding of the connections between elements within the university also suggests that these colleagues are, as a group, those most likely to be considered as natural historians within the university ecosystem (Kinchin, 2022b). This role requires a particular approach, akin to the ecopedagogy described by Misiaszek (2021): an approach that recognises the value of othered epistemologies. It has been suggested by Quinn and Vorster (2014) that a professional role such as academic development requires what Maton (2013: 95) calls 'a cultivated gaze', which 'offers the possibility of attaining legitimacy through prolonged immersion in a way of being, seeing or acting'. An epistemologically plural perspective (Figure 1, Cycle D) allows for the active curation of links across the epistemological abyss (Santos, 2014) by creating a bridge (Tovar-Gálvez, 2021) that recognises the value of perspectives anchored at either end – an 'epistemologically sophisticated cultivated gaze'. This sophisticated gaze enables the third space practitioner to exploit the institutional natural history (a detailed contextual knowledge of the interactions between individuals and groups in the university) and move towards an ecological understanding. The processes that sustain social-ecological systems can be understood as heuristics for preserving a healthy and dynamic working environment, rather than a stagnant and pathogenic one.

The function of Plateau D (Figure 1) is complex, and it needs to be considered as much more than simply developing empathy with colleagues working across the epistemological range on the university campus. It also relates to the idea of expertise and the need for academic developers working in the third space to acknowledge the disciplinary expertise exhibited by their peers who need to develop a reciprocal respect for colleagues who operate outside their epistemic community (Kinchin and Gravett, 2022). This resonates with the concept of 'epistemic humility', and 'concerns how subjects relate to the truth or rationality of their own beliefs compared to experts' knowledge on the subject matter', which can create 'a rhythm for the alternation of knowledge and ignorance' (Parviainen et al., 2021: 233). Potter (2022: 123) has argued, 'that epistemic humility requires that people examine assumptions of cognitive authority in order to ensure that it does not disguise dominance or suppress criticism from diverse viewpoints. In this way, we can move toward the virtue of epistemic humility and toward deeper and more grounded bodies of knowledge.'

Just as in clinical practice, judgements in educational practice are always accompanied by uncertainty, which is 'constant in its presence but inconsistent in its expression' (Schwab, 2012: 28). Acceptance and sharing of this uncertainty (as experienced in Plateau D of Figure 1) is a crucial step that needs to be recognised as part of the dynamics of third space practice. The ecological lens extends the move away from the reductive binary academic-professional perspective that considers a 'third space', towards a rhizomatic perspective that further breaks down traditional boundaries. It allows us to illuminate many of the tricky problems facing third space practitioners that are seen by some as contradictory: for example, helping academics and students to become part of their academic tribes by conforming to dominant reading and writing conventions that replicate colonial values, while simultaneously promoting decolonisation of higher education (Bohlmann, 2022) and creating a more socially just education system.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

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

References

Bacevic, J. (2019) 'With or without U? Assemblage theory and (de)territorialising the university'. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 17 (1), 78–91. [CrossRef]

Balloo, K., Ramos, F., Crank, R., Crane, D., Hopkins, S., McGovern, M., Parkes, F., Penno, J., Singh, N., Todd, N., Wilson, V., Windsor, A. and Worsley, S. (2023) 'Exploring the identities of pathways educators through the lens of third space theory'. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 1–23. [CrossRef]

Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Biesta, G.J.J. and Van Braak, M. (2020) 'Beyond the medical model: Thinking differently about medical education and medical education research'. *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*, 32 (4), 449–56. [CrossRef]

Bohlmann, J. (2022) 'Decolonising learning development through reflective and relational practice'. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 24. [CrossRef]

Bozalek, V. and Zembylas, M. (2017) 'Diffraction or reflection? Sketching the contours of two methodologies in educational research'. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30 (2), 111–27. [CrossRef]

Brew, A., Boud, D., Lucas, L. and Crawford, K. (2018) 'Academic artisans in the research university'. *Higher Education*, 76, 115–27. [CrossRef]

Capra, F. and Luisi, P.L. (2014) *The Systems View of Life: A unifying vision.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carel, H. (2021) 'Pathology as a phenomenological tool'. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 54 (2), 201–17. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F. and Hernandez, K.-A.C. (2013) *Collaborative Autoethnography*. New York: Routledge.

Code, L. (2006) *Ecological Thinking: The politics of epistemic location*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dedeoğlu, Ç. and Zampaki, N. (2023) 'Posthumanism for sustainability: A scoping review'. *Journal of Posthumanism*, 3 (1), 33–57. [CrossRef]

Doucet, A. (2021) 'What does Rachel Carson have to do with family sociology and family policies? Ecological imaginaries, relational ontologies, and crossing social imaginaries'. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 10 (1), 11–31. [CrossRef]

Fortune, T., Ennals, P., Bhopti, A., Neilson, C., Darzins, S. and Bruce, C. (2016) 'Bridging identity "chasms": Occupational therapy academics' reflections on the journey towards scholarship'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21 (3), 313–25. [CrossRef]

Gabriel, Y. (2016) 'Narrative ecologies and the role of counter-narratives: The case of nostalgic stories and conspiracy theories'. In S. Frandsen, T. Kuhn and M.W. Lundholt (eds), *Counter-narratives and Organization*. London: Routledge, 208–26.

Gieryn, T.F. (1983) 'Boundary-work and the demarcation of science from non-science: Strains and interests in professional ideologies of scientists'. *American Sociological Review*, 48 (6), 781. [CrossRef]

Gravett, K. and Ajjawi, R. (2022) 'Belonging as situated practice'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47 (7), 1386–96. [CrossRef]

Guerin, C. (2013) 'Rhizomatic research cultures, writing groups and academic researcher identities'. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 8, 137–50. [CrossRef]
Guyotte, K.W., Flint, M.A. and Latopolski, K.S. (2021) 'Cartographies of belonging: Mapping nomadic narratives of first-year students'. *Critical Studies in Education*, 62 (5), 543–58. [CrossRef]
Healy, S. (2003) 'Epistemological pluralism and the "politics of choice"'. *Futures*, 35 (7), 689–701. [CrossRef]
Heron, M., Kinchin, I.M. and Medland, E. (2018) 'Interview talk and the co-construction of concept maps'. *Educational Research*, 60 (4), 373–89. [CrossRef]
Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T. and Bond, A. (2020) 'The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning'. *Educause Review*, 27 (1), 1–9.
Holling, C.S. (2001) 'Understanding the complexity of economic, ecological, and social systems'. *Ecosystems*, 4 (5), 390–405. [CrossRef]
Hosein, A., Rao, N., Yeh, C.S.-H. and Kinchin, I.M. (2018) *Academics' International Teaching Journeys: Personal narratives of transitions in Higher Education*. London: Bloomsbury.
Ibarra, H. (1999) 'Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44 (4), 764–91. [CrossRef]
Jackson, A.Y. and Mazzei, L.A. (2013) *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing data across multiple perspectives*. London: Routledge.
Kinchin, I.M. (2022a) 'Exploring dynamic processes within the ecological university: A focus on the adaptive cycle'. *Oxford Review of Education*, 48 (5), 675–92. [CrossRef]
Kinchin, I.M. (2022b) 'The ecological root metaphor for higher education: Searching for evidence of conceptual emergence within university education strategies'. *Education Sciences*, 12 (8), 528. [CrossRef]
Kinchin, I.M. (2022c) 'An ecological lens on the professional development of university teachers'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 27 (6), 831–9. [CrossRef]
Kinchin, I.M. (2023) 'Five moves towards an ecological university'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28 (5), 918–32. [CrossRef]
Kinchin, I.M. (2024) *How to Mend a University: Towards a sustainable learning environment in higher education*. London: Bloomsbury.
Kinchin, I.M. and Gravett, K. (2022) *Dominant Discourses in Higher Education: Critical perspectives, cartographies and practice*. London: Bloomsbury.
Kinchin, I.M., Heron, M., Hosein, A., Lygo-Baker, S., Medland, E., Morley, D. and Winstone, N.E. (2018) 'Researcher-led academic development'. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 23 (4), 339–54. [CrossRef]
Kinchin, I.M. and Pugh, S. (2024) 'The complex transition to academic development: An ecological perspective'. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 29 (1), 141–5. [CrossRef]
Kinchin, I.M. and Winstone, N.E. (2018) *Exploring Pedagogic Frailty and Resilience: Case studies of academic narrative*. Leiden: Brill.
Lenz Taguchi, H. (2013) 'A diffractive and Deleuzian approach to analysing interview data'. *Feminist Theory*, 13 (3), 265–81. [CrossRef]
Little, D. and Green, D.A. (2022) 'Credibility in educational development: Trustworthiness, expertise, and identification'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41 (3), 804–19. [CrossRef]
Ljungdalh, A.K. (2020) 'The epistemological potential of the pathological'. In P.-O. Méthot (ed.), *Vital Norms: Canguilhem's 'The Normal and the Pathological' in the twenty-first century*. Paris: Hermann, 333–63.
Lönngren, J. and Van Poeck, K. (2021) 'Wicked problems: A mapping review of the literature'. *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology*, 28 (6), 481–502. [CrossRef]
Maton, K. (2013) *Knowledge and Knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education*. London: Routledge.
Mazzei, L.A. and Smithers, L.E. (2020) 'Qualitative inquiry in the making: A minor pedagogy'. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 26 (1), 99–108. [CrossRef]
Misiaszek, G.W. (2021) *Ecopedagogy: Critical environmental teaching for planetary justice and global sustainable development*. London: Bloomsbury.
Parviainen, J., Koski, A. and Torkkola, S. (2021) '"Building a ship while sailing it." Epistemic humility and the temporality of non-knowledge in political decision-making on COVID-19'. *Social Epistemology*, 35 (3), 232–44. [CrossRef]
Plotnikof, M. and Utoft, E.H. (2021) 'The "new normal" of academia in pandemic times: Resisting toxicity through care'. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 29 (4), 1259–71. [CrossRef]

Potter, N.N. (2022) 'The virtue of epistemic humility'. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 29 (2), 121–3. [CrossRef]
Quinn, L. and Vorster, J.-A. (2014) 'Isn't it time to start thinking about "developing" academic developers in a more systematic way?'. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19 (3), 255–8 [CrossRef]
Santos, B.d.S. (2014) *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*. London: Routledge.
Schön, D.A. (1971) *Beyond the Stable State: Public and private learning in a changing society*. London: Temple Smith.
Schwab, A. (2012) 'Epistemic humility and medical practice: Translating epistemic categories into ethical obligations'. *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 37 (1), 28–48. [CrossRef]
Skopec, M., Fyfe, M., Issa, H., Ippolito, K., Anderson, M. and Harris, M. (2021) 'Decolonization in a higher education STEMM institution – is "epistemic fragility" a barrier?'. *London Review of Education*, 19 (1), 1–21. [CrossRef]
St. Pierre, E.A. (2014) 'A brief personal history of post qualitative research: Toward "post inquiry"'. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 30 (2), 2–19.
Stanton, K. and Young, S. (2022) 'Academic developers as flexible generalists: Responding to COVID-19'. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 27 (2), 212–15. [CrossRef]
Strom, K.J. and Martin, A.D. (2017) *Becoming Teacher: A rhizomatic look at first-year teaching*. Rotterdam: Sense.
Sundstrom, S.M. and Allen, C.R. (2019) 'The adaptive cycle: More than a metaphor'. *Ecological Complexity*, 39, 100767. [CrossRef]
Tovar-Gálvez, J.C. (2021) 'The epistemological bridge as a framework to guide teachers to design culturally inclusive practices'. *International Journal of Science Education*, 43 (5), 760–76. [CrossRef]
Veles, N., Graham, C. and Ovaska, C. (2023) 'University professional staff roles, identities, and spaces of interaction: Systematic review of literature published in 2000–2020'. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 7 (2), 127–68. [CrossRef]
Wang, J. and Roulston, K.J. (2007) 'An alternative approach to conceptualizing interviews in HRD research'. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 18 (2), 179–210. [CrossRef]
Whitchurch, C. (2008) 'Shifting identities and blurring boundaries: The emergence of *third space* professionals in UK Higher Education'. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62 (4), 377–96. [CrossRef]
Wieman, C.E. (2019) 'Expertise in university teaching & the implications for teaching effectiveness, evaluation & training'. *Daedalus*, 148 (4), 47–78. [CrossRef]
Zellmer, A.J., Allen, T.F.H. and Kesseboehmer, K. (2006) 'The nature of ecological complexity: A protocol for building the narrative'. *Ecological Complexity*, 3 (3), 171–82. [CrossRef]

https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.22.1.17