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

Research article

Grounded in liquidity: writing and identity in third space

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that writing for publication has the potential to support the creation, negotiation and stabilisation of the professional identities of third space practitioners in higher education. Caught in the impermanence and unpredictability of liquid life, third space opens up unique opportunities in writing that afford its practitioners a means of building and sustaining identity. It expands academic writing beyond its normative constraints, creating a tension between the apparent permanence and solidity of writing and the liquidity that allows for the negotiation of meaning and identity. As such, writing, particularly for dissemination, provides third space practitioners with a strategy for creating a grounding narrative that helps to stabilise their own identity while allowing the flexibility required by a 'liquid' and uncertain present. We explore this process of negotiation by examining the role of writing in identity formation from the perspective

of a range of third space practitioners, in an international triple-site qualitative research study involving learning developers, learning designers, academic developers and writing specialists. Our findings reveal that writing, as an act of negotiation of identity in third space, has the potential to actuate the fluidity of the space, so that it can become a site of liberation and resistance that may transform the very act of scholarly writing. What our study shows is that writing offers third space practitioners an opportunity to establish a narrative thread that may stabilise their liquid roles in academia.

Keywords third space; writing; identity; academic; professional; resistance; liberatory; higher education; writing in higher education

Introduction

Celia Whitchurch's body of work on the conceptualisation of 'third space' – a concept developed since Whitchurch (2008) – has forced a reassessment of higher education with regard to the roles and identities of those who practise in this landscape. Subsequently, many aspects of working in third space, including career paths and opportunities, structures and leadership, recognition and impact, have been well theorised and brought to light (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022), yet little attention has been paid to a specific activity within third space practice that has the power of mobilising and reshaping professional identity: the act of writing. In this article, we argue that writing is both a powerful tool for negotiation of professional identity in third space and a site where the fluidity of this space opens up compelling opportunities for liberation and resistance in the way it is practised.

There is little agreement regarding what third space in higher education means, except that it is a useful metaphor that challenges the well-established boundaries between the first space of traditional academic work (Stoten, 2022) and the second space of administrative roles, often seen in a hierarchical relationship (Whitchurch, 2015). As such, it acts as a 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1998) where these worlds can be brought together. The nomenclature around third space practitioners reflects this sense of contact, evolving from cross-boundary or blended professionals (Whitchurch, 2008) to para-academics (Macfarlane, 2011) and, most recently, integrated practitioners (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). In acknowledgement of the capaciousness of the term, Whitchurch (2023a) encourages us to avoid constraining it to 'the' third space but to appreciate it as a fluid, multiform and kaleidoscopic space of possibility for practising in between the dichotomies of higher education. Heeding that call, and mindful that there are infinite possibilities of colour and shape contained within the kaleidoscope, we use the values, activity and praxis of the knowledge economy to clarify how we define third space and third space professionals.

Our understanding of third space responds to Bauman's (2000) concept of liquidity, which rejects the durability of traditional constructs in favour of the freedom of fluidity and transience. In this sense, third space can be seen as a liquid and amorphous academic-adjacent space, a 'social and cultural imaginary' (Veles, 2022: 3) that flexes in response to the changing contexts and demands of the modern university. It may be built into higher education structures or emerge organically, with its members locating themselves in it depending on their academic activity, 'the burden of pattern-weaving' (Bauman, 2000: 8) of identity falling on individual shoulders. Our definition of third space practitioners therefore includes those who do not fit neatly into the academic/non-academic role binary, but who draw on both of these spaces in their daily practice, weaving their own patterns of interaction (Bauman, 2000). While they might assist with different dimensions of teaching and learning (for example, by training academics or supporting students), crucially, they practise in a scholarly, evidence-based way, and have the potential to produce knowledge. It is this latter aspect of their activity that is of interest to this study.

To the increasingly liquid (Bauman, 2005) context of academia, third space adds another layer of fluidity that makes writing in the professional context a different kind of proposition to the existing academic models and expectations. Third space practitioners' relationship with writing is often more complex than that of traditionally situated researchers and academics, who are usually inducted into the world of writing in a gradual and identity-solidifying process of progressing from students to

scholars. In contrast, many third space professionals, with their multiple entry points and transition routes into and through third space, experience their professional setting as liquid space; for some, it is an identity-recycling bustle where the academic aspects of their identity are not only often ignored or invalidated by others (Whitchurch, 2023b), but also subject to 'constant self-scrutiny, self-critique and self-censure' (Bauman, 2005: 11) brought on by an unstable positionality within academia. This instability in identity may pose a threat to the third space practitioner's ability to identify with one of the most distinctive features of the university environment: knowledge work. Coupled with a frequent lack of contractual obligation or recognition for writing, particularly formal writing for publication, occupying third space may destabilise self-identification as a knowledge producer in higher education.

This study explores how writing can act as a means of grounding in this liquid space, presenting it as a route – and, in a sense, also a root – to stabilising professional identity in higher education. As has been shown in the more conventional academic context, writing can act as a conduit for selfhood in the way it brings together self, discourse and context (Ivanič, 1998). The complications of third space, however, reveal additional aspects of the role of writing in the development, negotiation and maintenance of professional identity, adding intriguing insights into the existing scholarship on writing and identity in academia. Critically, when positioned as a 'boundary object' (Star and Griesemer, 1989, cited in Fox, 2011), both stable enough to maintain shared meanings and flexible enough to challenge and reshape them, writing allows for communication across boundaries and positionalities. As such, it plays an important role in balancing third space professionals' identity situated on a well-established but reductive higher education spectrum between 'academic' and 'professional'.

Identity and professional identity

Identity is a complex term, containing within it the multiplicity of understandings an individual can have of themselves, in an ongoing and reflexive process of social construction and interpretation that creates a coherent yet fluid narrative (Ivanič, 1998). As well as providing a thread that connects past, present and future (Henkel, 2000), identity encapsulates 'what we do, and also what we don't do, can't do, will do, won't do, like to do, don't like to do, want to do, have access to do, are allowed to do, are forbidden to do, do now, did before, virtually do, and so on' (Phelan and Kinsella, 2014: 18, cited in Fortune et al., 2016: 314). Construction and reconstruction of our sense of who we are is therefore fluid, dynamic and contextual, both shaping and being shaped by the social environment and an individual's engagement with and participation in it (Jawitz, 2009).

The ongoing process of individual identity negotiation exists necessarily in a broader social context, which is, in turn, subject to shifts and interpretation. In higher education, part of this social environment is the academic *habitus* of internalised perceptions and structures (Bourdieu, 1977), incorporating and acting on our feelings of competence and self-worth, and the discipline-based 'thinking and practising' we experience, absorb and adopt (Clegg, 2008: 332). Belonging to a traditional academic discipline provides both an organisational framework and an ontological community with shared values, theory and praxis (Jawitz, 2009). However, where that form of bridging disciplinary practice does not exist in the same unifying way – as is the case in third space (Billot, 2010) – the cycle of being and becoming that is central to identity work does not turn so smoothly. Those who enter academia through non-standard routes, or who experience third space as a peripheral position, including learning developers, academic developers and writing specialists, may feel marginalised, with a subsequent impact on their 'sense of purpose, self-efficacy, motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and effectiveness' in their role (Day et al., 2006: 601, cited in Billot, 2010: 713): in other words, their professional identity.

In this study, we see professional identity as a form of self-representation existing at the intersection of professional selfhood and professional positioning, with the former being felt and constructed internally and agentially ('this is the person I am'), and the latter being experienced through the eyes of others ('this is how I am perceived'); how we self-identify versus how we are identified by others (Fortune et al., 2016: 315). This intersection comes to life through social interaction, where a person's sense of self is confronted with the constructions imposed by others (Ivanič [1998: 19] calls it 'boundary work between "the self" and "the other"', and wherever agency and structure meet (Billot, 2010). We explore here the particular role that writing plays in the negotiation of identity for third space professionals, as a 'shared academic action' (Fortune et al., 2016: 323), or a 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1998), that allows individuals to define, redefine and re-present themselves to others.

Writing as an identity act

To engage in the process of writing is to participate in a process of professional identification. Writing positions a writer within a set of practices and a discourse community, which can be embraced or resisted through reflexive, fluid and continuous negotiation over time, as part of what Ivanič (1998: 27) terms 'the socially available possibilities for self-hood' of the writer. While writing may not always feature significantly in the career development of third space professionals, it remains a principal means by which they can construct and present their professional identity to others; higher education is 'saturated in academic writing practices' (French, 2020: 1607), and successful participation in those practices relies on knowledge of, and identification with, them. If writing functions reflexively both to constitute and to express identities (Ivanič, 1998), then it becomes 'part of the lived complexity of a person's project and their ways of being in those sites which are constituted as being part of the academic environment' (Clegg, 2008: 329). However, 'the socially available possibilities for self-hood' (Ivanič, 1998: 27) offered by and for third space are multiple, something Whitchurch et al. (2023) capture in the concept of career scripts that third space professionals develop to negotiate their professional journey. The tension between institutional scripts, which correspond to formal requirements around writing, practice scripts, which relate to the embeddedness in professional networks, and internal scripts, which favour personal interests and agency in defining and enacting the value of writing, is apposite to the circumstances created by the act of writing in third space. We therefore build on this theorisation of the interface between self, writing and third space singularity to illuminate the role of writing in providing third space professionals a means for grounding and situating a pluralistic and fluid professional identity.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research design that offers an insight into three groups of third space professionals' ($n = 12$) 'lived experience, views and perspectives' (Clarke and Braun, 2017: 297) of working and writing in third space in three different geographic and cultural contexts. The richness of the data derived from qualitative approaches means that small numbers of participants – even as few as one or two (Clarke and Braun, 2017) – can generate 'complex and nuanced' interpretations (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 78). The intention is not to find generalisable and transferable patterns, but to understand these experiences in depth.

Our aim was to explore the role that writing plays in the negotiation and trans/formation of the professional identity of a third space practitioner, and therefore the research question we pursued was: how does writing provide a grounding narrative for the liquid identities of third space professionals? As identity is socially situated, and its form and meaning are negotiated by social agents who are enabled by a common discourse to take on recognisable social roles (Ivanič, 1998), we chose to use focus groups as our principal research method, to most effectively capture the group meanings created through interaction (Bloor et al., 2001). We deployed purposive and convenience sampling to populate our focus groups (Palinkas et al., 2015), inviting teams of colleagues working in third space. Khan and Manderson (1992: 60) note the benefits of using pre-existing groups for research rooted in social interactions, as 'Such natural clusterings of people represent ... the resources upon which any member of the group might draw.' Accordingly, we wanted to work with established teams who recognised their shared professional identity, and for whom writing was part of what they did and how they worked. We learnt through our conversations with the participants that they produced a range of outputs, from research articles, books and book chapters, to blog posts and other informal modes of writing. Our goal was to approach these focus groups as an opportunity for participants to articulate and share with familiar others the emotional, cognitive and social structures that guide, inform and constrain their sense of who they are as writers in third space, knowing that those familiar others would also be part of those structures.

Data were generated in two stages. We first hosted focus groups to explore the participants' collective experience with writing. We then handed out questionnaires for individual reflection, in three university settings: two in the UK (University A and B) and one in Canada (University C). Both UK universities are teaching-focused post-1992 institutions, albeit of different sizes, while the Canadian university is medium-sized and research-intensive. In University A, participants ($n = 5$) all worked in academic development, with the roles of learning designer, learning technologist and academic developer. In University B, the participants ($n = 4$) were educational developers and in-session English

The focus groups opened with participants describing their reasons for choosing their particular figure, using the symbolism in the character to build rich metaphors for their relationship with writing. For example, one participant chose a welder, explaining that his 'experience with writing is very much about drawing existing literature together with new insights', while another participant was attracted to the more emotional elements of writing, choosing the fighter Brunhilda as someone representing her 'battling with writing'. Subsequently, the participants placed their avatars on the scale to fit where they saw themselves, depending on the context. Their positioning therefore fluctuated as we asked participants to express their identity through three different lenses: how they saw themselves; how they believed their colleagues in third space saw them; and where on the scale they thought they were perceived by 'academics'. Externalising their identities in this way allowed participants to compare their experiences with the experiences of their colleagues, and provided a point of departure for the developing conversation. We then proceeded to the focus group questions, supporting a conversational back-and-forth among participants.

Once all the focus groups had been completed, the transcriptions were uploaded into NVivo for analysis. We followed King et al.'s (2019: 200) advice to focus on 'recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts ... which [are] relevant to the research question'. After familiarising ourselves with the contents of the transcripts, we began with the concept of writing as an identity act, and deductively assigned codes that might explain the nature of this act, until saturation was reached. We cross-referenced the transcripts to ensure consistency in our use of these descriptive codes. Thus satisfied, we were able to formulate three themes from the data.

We closed the data collection stage of the study with a questionnaire sent to all participants, which probed the research themes further. This offered everyone the opportunity to reflect on and explore the topics we covered in the focus group in more depth – in writing and individually, without the pressure of time or the influence of others. This questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous, and we received three responses from each of the three universities. While the answers gave us a richer picture of the three themes, no new thematic strands emerged; therefore, we integrated the written responses into the existing themes before final analysis.

Exploration

The starting point for the study was the premise that writing may serve as a grounding act that can help to stabilise the professional identities of third space practitioners in higher education. We hypothesised that this is achieved through the socially situated nature of writing and the value that third space practitioners and their colleagues place on it.

Conceptualising professional identity

We began by exploring how the participants weave the patterns (Bauman, 2000) of their own professional identity within third space, as well as how and whether this might change when prompted to consider others' perceptions. In each of the three focus groups, participants first positioned their chosen minifigure across a broad spectrum on the arbitrary scale from 'professional' to 'academic'; the respondents' choices oscillated around the middle of the scale, and no one committed to a pole. Our interest lay in the movement of those figures once outsiders' perceptions were considered, hoping to reveal something about the local cultural context in which these three groups worked. Indeed, at University A, when asked about academics' perceptions, most participants remained at, or moved closer to, the 'academic' end, whereas at University B, the tendency was to move in the opposite direction, observed also at University C. While we largely anticipated the choices made by the participants at Universities B and C, given the positioning of professional services outside the traditional academic tribes and territories (Becher and Trowler, 2001), the results of University A, where the participants' academic identity seemed more salient, were unexpected, but it resonated with our understanding of the fluidity and unpredictability of third space identities. Nonetheless, these results were not confirmed in the questionnaire, where all participants individually identified with more 'professional' outsider perceptions, potentially revealing a collectively constructed (but individually less stable) 'academic' identity of the focus group at University A. Regardless of this curious exception, which tells us a lot about the impact

of supportive local contexts, whenever the participants moved toward the 'academic' end of the scale, they cited practices linked with knowledge production as justification for that movement.

This minifigure exercise demonstrated that our participants' professional identity was unstable and sat at the fluid intersection of the local institutional culture (the institutional scripts [Whitchurch et al., 2023]) and the intensity of the participants' scholarly activity (the confluence of the practice and institutional scripts (Whitchurch et al., 2023)). At University A, participants' identities were set against the context of a practitioner-led and industry-based teaching community, which enhanced this team's academic credentials: 'When I used to work with academics when we first started, they would think of us as academics because we were the education experts.' This was echoed by another participant, who said, 'If you're teaching how to be an academic, I guess they would see me at that end [academic] because I'm leading it.' But it was scholarly activity that participants most often cited as signalling their professional identity to colleagues: 'I think like an academic, I act like an academic, you know, everything that informs my work is academic, teaching, research.' To this perspective, colleagues at University B added the collaborative nature of their work, which gives them a stronger group identity: 'we bounce off each other and inspire each other, to research more, to think about what we do', and which has the power of reaching 'a genuine understanding of ... this mixed role I see myself as having'. However, at University C, although one participant stated that she built her sense of identity from 'people's ... response to me and in terms of what they've asked me to do', the other two colleagues felt constrained by the professional-academic identity scale and its dichotomy, as 'off the spectrum is where I felt most comfortable', and 'I wish there was some other direction to the scale', even though 'what we do is still very academic'. Overall, self-identification was not straightforward for any of the participants, and it revealed internal tensions in the meaning of actions, ambitions and perceptions expressed on this academic-professional continuum. This in turn reflects the tensions Whitchurch (2023a) identified between those finding third space frustrating (and who think of themselves as 'working in third space') and those who find it liberating and filled with opportunity ('third space professionals').

The negotiation of professional identity through writing

We were curious about the role of writing in helping to mobilise and negotiate these unstable identities, along with how it can signal to others something about that identity. According to Ivanič (1998: 32), 'The relations of power, interests, values, beliefs and practices in institutional settings enable and constrain people's possibilities for self-hood as they write.'

As Lea and Stierer (2011: 607) have demonstrated, however, 'writing practices are integrally related to aspects of academic identity and ... these are not confined to conventional disciplinary articulations'. Writing can therefore be directly related to third space academic identity formation. Indeed, several respondents shared how important writing was to their conceptions of themselves, going as far as claiming that their self-identity as a 'writer' marked them as an 'academic'. Writing was seen as aligned with Pratt's (1998: 34) concept of the 'contact zone' where the professional and academic writing 'cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other'. In this zone, the traditionally academic activity of writing is harnessed by third space professionals to find permanence in flow and to forge a sense of solidity through knowledge production. In this vein, our participants agreed that writing adds 'credibility in the role', especially for those coming into academia from practical fields, such as nursing. As one participant put it, 'writing can bring me to the place I want to be as a person' and start forming 'a reputation ... in that sphere', among both colleagues and students. What these responses consistently revealed was that to our participants, writing in third space provided three key means for the negotiation of professional identity, which arise from the specificity of third space and its liquid, liberatory and contested nature (Whitchurch, 2015). We present these three emergent themes – liquidity, liberty and opportunity for resistance – as characteristics of writing in third space.

The liquidity of writing and identity in third space

The combined responses from the focus groups and questionnaires testify to the power of writing in negotiating professional identity in third space. This is mainly due to the liquid and unbounded nature of a space that allows for movement and hybridity. As mentioned before, the round of questions we asked about the self-perceptions of our participants, alongside what they perceive as the reputations they carry in the eyes of others, produced a series of movements on the spectrum of 'academic' versus

'professional' identity. These movements were justified by the level of academic practice and knowledge production in which our participants engaged, mainly writing. As one participant put it, 'It's the push and pull of academic and professional identities', and – as one participant expounded in the questionnaire – these identities can be inhabited depending on the given context:

I have a professional position in an academic context; I suppose from the outside my role would be seen as professional. However, much of my day is spent discussing academic questions or academic work in a coaching or teaching role and, beyond the 1:1 engagements with students, I conduct research that informs the development of new resources and strategies. While these outputs aren't academic in the traditional peer-review sense, they are rooted in the same processes and have the same goal – to share knowledge in an intelligible and informed manner. I've always thought alt-ac is an appropriate way to describe my role.

While looking for an alternative moniker that better describes this ineffable professional identity, the hyphenated nature of the new label in the description above ('alt-ac', a shorthand for 'alternative academic') accounts for the fluidity of what is seen as an unconventional academic role and its practical manifestations. (However, the way our participant seemed to understand 'alt-ac' does not align with Bethman and Longstreet's [2013: n.p.] definition of 'alt-ac as an umbrella term to refer to full-time non-teaching and non-research positions within higher education', which suggests a very personal (mis)appropriation of the term.) At times, this fluidity produced in our participants constraints and frustrations, of which we identified two main kinds: (1) a sense of not belonging but of seeing oneself as 'an education academic who feels out of place in a professional service'; and (2) more pertinently to our argument, an awareness that scholarly activity is, or has to be done, 'around the edges of my role, rather than as a recognised part of it'. These frustrations did not dominate the conversations, however. More often, the fluidity of the academic–professional spectrum seemed to allow these third space professionals to flourish (Whitchurch, 2023b), offering additional opportunities to switch between identities: 'when I'm trying to figure things out, I have a more academic practice, but when I'm interacting with others, staff, even my colleagues, I do take on a more professional practice dialogue and writing slant', explained one questionnaire. The 'socially ratified ways of being' (Ivanič, 1998: 19) that form the basis of professional identity can therefore be enhanced in third space and – even more crucially – can be extended by professionals' writing and scholarly practices, illuminating, shaping and reshaping their professional identity.

Writing as a liberatory act in third space

Our participants alluded to the key difference between writing in an academic discipline and writing in third space as one involving potential for – or freedom from – scrutiny and judgement. As Ivanič (1998: 32) described it in the academic context, 'writing is a particularly salient form of social action for the negotiation of identities, because written text is deliberate, potentially permanent and used as evidence for many social purposes (such as judging academic achievement)'. Whereas an academic writer's voice was seen by our speakers as 'constrained' and 'policed' by the disciplinary community, third space writing seemingly affords 'more freedom to express yourself and not be judged'. In addition, the focus in national research quality exercises on those staff 'with significant responsibility for research' (REF, 2019: 17), which tends to exclude women, 'minoritised ethnic groups and individuals with a disability' (REF, 2024: 4), as much as third space professionals, can have the unintended benefit of releasing third space professionals from the pressures of measurability and impact. Writing can be experienced as 'cathartic' and 'revelatory', a way to 'work things through in life' and to 'open up' thinking, rather than being forced by the 'publish or perish mindset' of traditional academia. As one of the University A participants writing in both disciplinary and practice-based contexts explained:

I think for me, when I'm writing up that end of the scale ['academic'], I'm writing because I ought to, you know, that expectation. But when I'm down here ['professional'], I'm writing because I want to. And it's a very different type of writing in this area because it's more therapeutic ... That's kind of where my most interesting writing comes and I get the most pleasure. But I think when I'm up there ['academic'] it's more about disseminating because we ought to get word out there about what we do ... But essentially where I feel happiest is in this place here ['professional'].

In a way, then, writing in third space may offer professionals a sense of liberation that allows them to take full advantage of what writing confers with fewer pressures and constraints imposed through external demands such as research frameworks and metrics. Our conversations indicated that it may also present more opportunities for connection and collaboration across 'external networks' needed for professional recognition, for example, through fellowships of AdvanceHE. As one participant who moved from a discipline-focused to a third space role complained, 'part of the problem for me was always that collaborative things didn't count for as much [in academia]', but in third space, collaborations are 'a happy place to be'. Many of our respondents were either involved in collaborative writing projects or actively supported one another in their writing endeavours.

This liberatory aspect of writing is rooted in the radical openness of third space when it comes to the possibilities and opportunities it may offer for writing (Syska and Buckley, 2022). While we still know relatively little about the kinds of writing that third space professionals do, our participants gave us an insight into the range of their preferred expressive forms. Our conversations indicate that what they write, or prefer to write, is not dissimilar from the so-called traditional academic outputs. Our respondents' writings cover a broad range of genres, including blog posts, informal articles, professional reports, opinion pieces, online discussion fora and other forms of grey literature. They also publish journal articles, literature reviews and book chapters in scholarly collections, which, they expressed, were their preferred form of publications. It seems that it is not so much the format that makes their engagement with writing different, but the outlet chosen to disseminate it, or more perceived freedom to choose it because the writing is not done 'in a publish or perish way', as one survey participant put it. The emphasis among our participants shifted from quantity or even quality of writing to its more social aspects, such as 'collaboration' and 'collectively growing knowledge'. Such writing engagements allow third space professionals to develop their expertise and professional identity in a creative, collegial and supportive way. Our participants' testimonials seemed to move writing away from an act that is performative and surveilled to one that is personal and fulfilling. Indeed, uncharacteristically in the context of academic writing, the word 'happy' was invoked multiple times, both in our focus group conversations and in the questionnaires.

Writing as a site of resistance in third space

One of the opportunities afforded by writing in third space is the possibility of resisting and transforming the existing practices around academic writing and publishing (Syska and Buckley, 2023a, 2023b). Our participants expressed deep-seated frustration about feeling forced (by journal editors and reviewers, in particular) to abandon the writing style that not only 'has a flicker of life' to it – echoing Bourdieu's famous statement about the deadness of academic language (Bourdieu et al., 1994) – but also one that might be challenging the well-established norms of writing. As a participant from University C declared:

I want to talk back to the Academy, I want to be in a position to say, 'no, good writing is not just these things, it can also be these things', and that gets to this conversation around linguistic justice.

For those who teach writing in higher education, it is a particularly difficult dilemma, as the rules of academic writing and composition reinforce, perpetuate and extend the accepted norms into the world of publishing. Instead of becoming 'our own gatekeepers' through the roles of reviewers and editors, the participants at University B agreed:

it's really important that we ... start to question the rules in our own writing, that ... we keep writing in the way that feels authentic and accessible, whatever we want it to be. Otherwise we're just closing things down. Or continuing to support the things that close people down ... It's all about permission ... the more pieces of work that go out there that don't follow the rules, the more spaces that are opened up for other people.

What our respondents seem to suggest is that while they are aware of, and prepared to submit to, the gatekeeping constraints and rigid expectations of journals, they also recognise them as artificial norms that should be challenged. Choosing less conventional outlets for publication – those interested in less conventional work – can be seen as an act of resistance that protects the writer's authentic voice and escapes that deadness of language. As podcast guest Helen Bowstead put it, 'the spaces [for alternative

writing] are there, you've just got to find them' (Buckley and Syska, 2023: n.p.). If 'it's all about permission', then the awareness of this choice is what makes resistance possible, not only for them, but also for those that follow.

Beyond the text itself, the sociocultural norms of writing in higher education were questioned as well:

For me, writing is very powerful in a kind of progressive sense, because it has the ability to explode these hierarchies and structures that are so much a part of the systems in which we operate. So, I just – I think we don't often get to use it in that way, and I don't think we often think of it in that way. But the potential is profound.

In a sense, then, these comments allude to the notion that resistance is an aspect of liberation, both allowing for a diversity of representations and moving beyond the prescribed spaces and borders where new connections and practices might emerge through constant negotiation (Syska and Buckley, 2023b). In 'processes of appropriation and transformation' (Ashcroft, 2008: 116), third space professionals have a chance to expand the possibilities of writing, using it to build a liminal community that could become a conduit for articulating their professional identity. What became clear in this study is that the way the third space practitioners we talked to were able to appropriate or transform academic language had a positively disruptive influence on their capacity to invigorate their writing and push the boundaries of academic expression.

Limitations of the study

Despite the richness of the data generated through our methodology, we are acutely aware that the study reflects the experience of a very small sample of practitioners inhabiting third space in only three cultural and institutional contexts. We did not intend to draw definitive conclusions around the nature of the intersection between writing and professional identity, or the ramifications of the contextual differences, but rather to offer a meaningful insight into the relationship between the two in selected settings. More research into different ways of being and writing in third spaces would be necessary to understand how the various contexts impact on this experience.

Similarly, although it would be compelling to enter the debate regarding the forms of knowledge production in third space, gatekeeping in academic journals and pushing the boundaries of academic publication, these issues are beyond the scope of this article and deserve meticulous attention in their own right. The main focus of the study and our key research interest lay in the act of writing and its ramifications for third space identity. In sharing their thoughts on writing, our participants did not engage with the issues of knowledge production, either in the focus groups or in the questionnaire responses, where the focus consistently remained on the process of writing per se. We hope that our particular focus opens up new avenues for exploration in the emerging debate over the production and communication of knowledge in higher education's third space.

Conclusion

Our research shows that there is limited agreement around the key forces that influence how third space professionals negotiate their identity. In our study, the differences stemmed from aspects such as the team culture, the individual autobiographical background and the particular activities involved in how a given practitioner enacted their third space role. Nonetheless, what was very clear and universally affirmed, both in the collectively experienced focus groups and in the individual responses to the questionnaire, was that writing occupied a very special place in our participants' professional identities. While often institutionally unrecognised or not formally expected in the role, the opportunities that writing offered for self-expression, knowledge production, and reputation building in academia posited it for our participants as a site of liberation and resistance that allows these third space professionals to expand, influence and redefine the academic context in which they operate. What our data reveal is that professional identity formation and negotiation is not just about how we see ourselves and how others see us, but also about what we do as a result, with the 'doing' part being strongly bound with writing in the context of our study. To paraphrase Phelan and Kinsella's (2014) playful words cited earlier, identity in

third space can be regulated and negotiated by what we write, and also what we don't write, can't write, will write, won't write, like to write, don't like to write, want to write, have access to write, are allowed to write, are forbidden to write, write now, wrote before, write alone or write with others. During the process of that negotiation, writing in third space opens up the potential for us, in a forward-thinking capacity, to use that semi-outsider perspective to be reflective, and to explore new possibilities, even to make change.

While we do recognise that moulding one's identity as more 'academic' through writing might be a way of absorbing, internalising, accommodating and reproducing the dominant higher education values, often manifested in the discourses of acquiring self-worth through publication or the culture of overwork (Kucirkova, 2023), for those to whom occupying third space represents a loss of academic identity in particular, writing can provide a strategy for creating a 'grounding narrative' (Stengel, 2013: 2) that helps to stabilise their own identity while also allowing the flexibility required by a liquid and uncertain present. For those who value and enjoy writing for its own sake, it is an opportunity to express themselves and enhance their professional well-being. And for those who flourish in the space by pushing its boundaries, it can be a fruitful site of resistance, with implications for how other third space professionals can engage with it and, in turn, use it to reshape their own identity. Within Ivanič's (1998: 27) 'socially available possibilities for self-hood', a person can expand and negotiate their identity within, or in opposition to, those constructed by the dominant discourses. Writing is one of the powerful tools that can be used to make that expansion and negotiation happen.

Exploring the opportunities for resistance that writing in third space offers strikes us as the most consequential revelation. Forced to appropriate the linguistic and writing conventions of the dominant academia, and also free to circumvent them by operating under their own expectations for writing, third space professionals are akin to bilingual writers. Like migrants who move between familiar and less familiar spaces, third space writers have the potential to carve their own writerly identity, at home in both worlds they occupy, but seldom fully integrated into either. What we learnt from our participants is that existing at a crossroads of academia, and having access to different dimensions of language and practice, makes it possible for them to mint their own language and writing style, thus pushing the boundaries of academic writing, resisting the imposed 'deadness' of academic language, and claiming agency of their own. In the process, both third space identities and the practices around academic writing have a chance to be transformed and become truly heterogeneous, bi-cultural and bi-dialectal contact zones between the professional and academic worlds. Indeed, championing these peripheral, rebellious, inclusive, trust-building, collaborative and transformative forms of writing is an important, and largely overlooked, contribution of those who work and write in third space. A greater understanding of writing in third space would be critical to promoting its value to both individuals and institutions.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Solent University ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare 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 authors declare no conflicts of interest with 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.

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