


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

Editorial

The concept of third space as an enabler in complex higher education environments

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The concept of third space in higher education is at the same time seductive and elusive. On the one hand, in increasingly fluid environments, with more porous external, as well as internal, boundaries, it has helped to capture roles and activities that cannot be categorised as belonging entirely to either academic or professional spheres. On the other, it often defies precise definition in relation to physical space, organisational structures or job profiles. Third space itself is therefore likely to be virtual, rather than being represented in formal organisational structures, although this may occur in the future. It is likely to be created bottom up by groups of individuals, rather than top down by institutional managers, meaning that in some cases it can become 'all things to all people'. Although some authors talk about *the* third space, this is liable to imply an illusory precision. Those who see themselves as working in third space often complain of a lack of visibility, recognition and legitimacy because it does not appear in organisation charts, job descriptions or career pathways. Nevertheless, as a concept, it has been powerful in pointing to the complexity of contemporary higher education institutions as organisations and employers, as well as to some of the dissonances that exist for individuals.

The concept of third space originated in cultural studies and major societal dimensions such as race, gender, class and urban geography (for example, Bhabha, 1990a, 1990b, 1994; Said, 1978; Soja, 1996). It is likely to involve a degree of struggle and negotiation in which 'the exchange of values, meaning and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical' (Bhabha, 1994: 2). The idea has been picked up

in relation to higher education in recent years in a developing literature, particularly in relation to roles in learning development (Beckmann, 2018; Bossu and Brown, 2018; Grant, 2021; LaCroix, 2021; Livingston and Ling, 2022; Knight et al., 2022; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022; Veles et al., 2023) and in research enterprise (Botha et al., 2021; Dunleavy et al., 2019; Holliman, 2017; Kerridge et al., 2024; Mackie and Holden, 2022; Santos et al., 2024; Veles, 2022). Emergent third space roles in higher education also include, for example, those in online and blended learning, widening participation, employability, and community and public engagement. Key issues arising are ways in which the above groups of individuals feel themselves to be accorded recognition and legitimacy, and thereby a sense of value by their institutions. The extent to which this occurs is likely to depend not only on structures and cultures at institutional and local level, but also on individual contacts and social capital. Third space fields of activity attract highly qualified staff, often to doctoral level, who work side by side with academic colleagues. In turn, they have developed their own professional associations, international networks, journals, blogs, podcasts and mail lists.

In recent years, McIntosh and Nutt's (2022) edited volume has explored the territory occupied by academic developers, Veles (2024) has looked in detail at the new knowledges and partnerships developed in third space to create what she calls 'collaborative capital', and Kerridge et al. (2024) have considered the in-between status and networks of research managers and administrators, who increasingly have master's and doctoral qualifications and/or experience as postdoctoral researchers. These and other roles are the subject of articles in this special issue, which provide an interpretation and exploration of third space and what it means, not only to work within it, but also to utilise it in ways that support institutional endeavours. The articles cover a range of roles, from those of professional staff interpreting institutional requirements to those of academic staff developing innovative approaches to teaching, exemplifying not only the enrichment of the working environment, but also the creative interplay between professional staff, teachers, students and researchers. The articles are almost equally divided in having a primary focus on academic staff, professional staff and those working in educational or research development roles.

We are fortunate to have an introductory piece by Natalia Veles (2024), using the concept of 'critical thirding' to describe how third space collaboration has resulted in the creation of new, Mode 3 knowledge and led to a transformative change of research commercialisation practices. This type of knowledge emphasises the involvement and feedback of stakeholders and users, goes beyond scientific 'truth' and technical know-how, and is sensitive to application in specific settings. It emphasises situated knowledge that leads to local understandings for specific contexts. Associated with this has been the notion of 'collaborative capital' and a process of 'de-invisibilisation' of individuals working in what Veles describes as the ecosystem of third space, with associated legitimisation and recognition. Her research is persuasive that 'collaboration between professional and academic staff needs to be normalised as a continuum of partnerships', built on 'translational skill' (Veles, 2024: 5, 6).

Bamford and Moschini's (2024) contribution exemplifies the use of learning techniques that are based on partnership with students, illustrating in diagrammatic form how this works in practice. Students became engaged through informal learning via the co-design and co-creation in a project that also included alumni, academics and professional service staff, over a three-year period. The virtual third space in which collaboration occurred moved beyond purely academic space or the dualism of teacher-student relationships, incorporating other dimensions of the participating students' lives, and accommodating cultural diversity. The gaming environment thereby created formed part of a Digital Citizenship Programme that fostered employability, citizenship and transferable skills. The motivational power of the scheme was reflected in artefacts that provided a fun element, going beyond the traditional boundaries of teacher-student relationships.

Jon Renyard (2024) shows how a more codified environment in the UK, in which standards of student attainment are assessed by the Office for Students via competitive metrics, has led to a greater need for quality assurance managers to engage in a creative and dialogic way with academic colleagues. Thus, in order to be successful in attracting students and government funding, institutions seek to align academic practice in ways that support positive outcomes in the metrics. Quality managers therefore need a sense of agency and legitimacy in working with academics, senior institutional managers and other stakeholders in what has become a third space environment. However, their ability to do this is likely to depend on the management structure of the university, for example, whether it is hierarchical or devolved, and also on the social capital that they are able to accrue with the various interested parties.

Ruth Pühr (2024: 3) also picks up the influence of structures and sees the third space positioning of faculty developers as an enabling factor in the 'eroding of ... established authority', the establishment

of a 'learning culture', and a strengthening of individual identities. Her research puts forward that the development of an academic identity by individuals undertaking formal teaching programmes is as important in developing confidence as the technical, practice skills that are usually emphasised. A tool is suggested for assessing the perceived strengths and weaknesses of individuals on a confidential basis, as a way of developing a more inclusive teaching environment focusing on personal growth as well as on disciplinary and pedagogic requirements. The intervention of faculty developers is to ensure, as 'interpretational gatekeepers' (Puhr, 2024: 8), that this is undertaken in a non-threatening way, and that the data are not used, for example, as part of formal institutional promotion and progression processes.

Likewise, Ian Kinchin and Suzie Pugh (2024: 2) focus on the work of academic developers, describing them as helping to drive 'epistemological plurality', transforming their own practice as well as that of others. As third space professionals, they are the 'natural historians' across the university 'ecosystem', and therefore become 'active curators' of third space. The authors go on to develop a dynamic model based on their own experience, in a development cycle that moves between creativity/innovation and stabilisation. This cycle combines epistemological knowledge with, for example, skills in 'nurturing relationships with students, cultivating learning environments and valuing everyday practice' (Kinchin and Suzie Pugh, 2024: 6). Arising from this process, they identify a tension between 'being' and 'becoming' with respect to the professional development and resilience of those working in third space.

Kristyna Campbell (2024) reveals how postgraduate teaching assistants (PGTAs), who are often situated in ambiguous spaces within higher education institutions, undergo continuous identity renegotiation as they balance academic and professional expectations. Her auto-ethnographic analysis emphasises that PGTAs, as 'blended professionals' operating in third space, often face uncertainty and unpredictability, shaping a distinct identity that neither fully aligns with traditional academic nor with purely professional staff roles. Through reflective vignettes, Campbell illustrates how the support and recognition that PGTAs receive from their academic communities influence their sense of belonging and professional identity. The study highlights the importance of understanding the unique experiences of PGTAs, advocating for institutional structures that acknowledge their contributions and foster a more integrated sense of professional identity amid their evolving roles.

Michelle Joubert (2024) highlights the work of academic literacy practitioners, a subset of professionals working within educational development, who have a key role in student success. They find themselves, as third space professionals, negotiating complex structural issues in order to gain legitimacy. Traditionally, academic literacy had been seen as remedial, the challenge being to integrate it into the curriculum, as an 'academic, research-driven field' (Joubert, 2024: 2) as well as a support service. Practitioners therefore seek to be incorporated into the mainstream by developing both aspects and creating new space. The author vividly describes the nature of the liminal space they inhabit, using Archer's (1996) theoretical framework to describe the tension between their structural and cultural positioning. Critical factors in developing and legitimising professional identity in the third space thereby created include research activity, communities of practice and collaboration.

Richard Freeman and Anna Price (2024) illustrate how researcher developers operate within third space, balancing institutional expectations with the professional growth needs of doctoral and postdoctoral researchers. Tasked with implementing frameworks such as the Vitae Researcher Development Framework and the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, researcher developers bridge academic and professional domains, fostering skills that extend beyond the traditional research environment. This work involves crafting programmes that cultivate researchers' intellectual abilities, personal effectiveness and career management skills. Positioned in an emergent, boundary-crossing role, researcher developers liaise with departments across the university – from equality and diversity teams to senior leadership – ensuring that professional development aligns with both institutional priorities and researchers' career aspirations. This unique positioning allows researcher developers to act as facilitators of research culture, making their contributions integral to modern higher education institutions.

Working with practitioners across the learning and educational development spectrum, Carina Buckley, Alicja Syska and Lindsay Heggie (Buckley et al., 2024) propose that the act of writing offers a means of achieving recognition for those in third space. They see this as a 'liquid' space that enables people to construct their professional identities via the production of knowledge that may not conform to norms of traditional academic disciplines. Liberatory aspects of this form of writing include a freeing from the formality of judgements associated with, for example, the UK Research Evaluation Framework, and the facilitation of collaborative networks through less formal outlets such as blogs, opinion pieces

and online discussion forums. Writing might therefore be said to represent an experimental, testing space, free of regulatory constraints, giving those in third space an opportunity to more clearly define and present themselves to others, as a 'social act'.

Kelly Vere, Charlotte Verney and Tara Webster-Deakin (Vere et al., 2024) focus specifically on people working in widening participation, technical staff and academic administrators. This is a welcome 'deep dive' into previously unexplored corners of third space. Particularly important for widening participation professionals is the co-construction of knowledge with academic colleagues, although this requires sustained effort which cannot be taken for granted. In turn, academic administrators, particularly at middle management level, are likely to experience some resistance when collaborating with academic colleagues, although this is less so at more senior levels. By contrast, the Technician Commitment (<https://www.techniciancommitment.org.uk>) has enabled technicians to experience a more collaborative environment, with inclusion in research grants and the authoring of research articles. Arising from these findings, the authors helpfully conclude that third space should not be conceived as 'a discrete or distinct space, which professionals work within or outside of, but instead ... as a way of working' (Vere et al., 2024: 12).

Katherine Emms, Natasha Kersh and Andrea Laczik (Emms et al., 2024) focus on professionals who support work-related learning. This includes fostering industry engagement and employability skills, creating what the authors refer to as a learning ecosystem between the classroom and the workplace. A range of stakeholders thereby co-create new spaces, challenging preconceptions and crossing physical, cultural and psychological boundaries. Although both academic and professional staff are employed in employability and engagement roles, the latter work as 'mediators or enablers', linking with employers, and 'complementing the role that academic staff play in embedding "work-relatedness" into the curriculum' (Emms et al., 2024: 6). Examples of third spaces thereby created include a departmental law clinic and a community radio station, where students link with the public and representatives from business and the professions. These in turn help students to develop their own networks and social capital.

Rachel Lamb, Carina Buckley and Sabrina Vieth (Lamb et al., 2024) describe a third space project, the Living CV, that supports employability agendas. It brings together staff in academic departments with those in learning development and careers to act as institutional champions for the project, enabling them to build social capital and develop as leaders. In turn, students acquire skills, experiences and achievements that will help in the workplace, constructing employability-ready CVs that have a unique value proposition. However, the project can also create tensions, particularly with regard to the time commitment required by academic staff, and the article gives an honest account of the struggles that can occur if enthusiasm wanes with competing priorities. Institutional commitment and leadership are therefore seen as essential to the success of this kind of multidimensional project.

Michael Hoelscher and Jan Lauer (2024) demonstrate how a new breed of university managers in Germany distinguish themselves from both the senior management team (the 'presidium') and the administration, which in the German system is primarily responsible for legal matters. In particular, this involves interpreting and translating formal requirements, negotiating with both groups of staff about their application, and thereby helping to drive university strategy in contemporary environments. These higher education managers are therefore seen as working in third space between academic and administrative spheres, reflected in the fact that in some German states they are classified as a separate employment category. They are therefore increasingly valued not only for their knowledge, but also for their communication and negotiating skills, reflecting their role as interpreters between the different constituencies of the university.

Thanks to our range of contributors, who adopt different approaches to and understandings of third space, this special issue demonstrates how the concept can represent a freeing up of traditional relationships between professional staff, academic staff and students, as well as associates outside the university. As a theory, it is helpful in problematising roles that do not necessarily fit the traditional, formal structures that persist in higher education institutions. It can therefore generate creative thinking about roles and relationships that go beyond traditional job descriptions and organisation charts. Nevertheless, it is not a panacea, and it may require careful management, particularly if introduced top down rather than emerging bottom up via local allegiance to a specific project. However, taken as a whole, the articles described above show how the concept of third space is increasingly recognised, particularly by those who work within it. This can only increase pressure for it to be accommodated more

imaginatively in future, for example, in role descriptions, progression and career frameworks, and reward and incentive mechanisms.

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