Reconstructing Identities in Higher Education: The Rise of the 'Third Space' Professionals

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The projects

• Two studies funded by the UK Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE)

• 9 institutions; 70 respondents; UK/US/Australia

• 42 respondents with professional contracts, but also doctorates, publications, and/or experience of teaching/research

• Their roles had significant academic elements (tutoring, programme design, learning support, institutional research)
The emergence of mixed roles

• Backgrounds in eg adult and further education, policy agencies, charitable sector

• Research training prepares for careers that may not be purely academic

• Job description for Learning Partnerships Manager (UK) required: “...academic credibility... experience of generating external income, and involvement in project management”
Areas of activity involving mixed roles

- **Teaching and learning** eg tutoring, programme design/documentation, study skills/academic literacy
- **Community partnership** eg employer and public engagement, workplace learning, outreach sessions
- **Online learning** eg programme design and development, web-based discussion fora
- **Research enterprise** eg preparing bids, knowledge transfer, spin out, bespoke programmes for industry
- **Institutional research** into eg student recruitment/ outcomes, benchmarking, educational practice
Preference for mixed roles

- People who could have gone ‘either way’…

- Positive choice arising from eg:
  - No longer committed to function or discipline
  - Commitment to project such as widening participation, equity and diversity
  - Preferred team working
  - Pragmatic eg route into higher education, career development, funding opportunities, job in specific location
The emergence of 'Third Space'

“I’ve always worked at interfaces.. although I will occasionally say ‘well of course we’re just marginalised’… I like to be where it doesn’t matter if you bend the rules or do things differently” (learning partnerships manager)

• Formal employment categories (‘academic’ or ‘non-academic’) don’t reflect reality

• This has created a 'Third Space' between academic and professional roles
Third Space as applied to higher education

The Student Experience
- Life and welfare
- Widening participation
- Employability/careers
- Equity and diversity
- Outreach

Learning Support
- Programme
- Design/development
- Web-based learning
- Academic literacy
- Work-based learning

Community and Business Partnership
- Regional regeneration
- Community outreach
- Knowledge exchange
- Business/technology incubation

‘Perimeter’ roles eg
- Access/equity/disability
- Study skills
- Regional partnership

‘Perimeter’ roles eg
- Academic Staff
- Teaching
- Teaching/curriculum development for non-traditional students
- Research
- Links with local education providers
- ‘Third leg’ eg public service, enterprise

Professional Staff
- Generalist functions
  (eg registry, department/school management)
- Specialist functions
  (eg finance, human resources)
- ‘Niche’ functions
  (eg quality, research management)

‘Perimeter’ roles eg
- Study skills
- Regional partnership

Whitchurch (2013)

Examples of Institutional Projects in Third Space

Mixed teams
“The Higher Education Professional”
Spaces

• Ambiguous conditions arising from working at interfaces:

  • “Sometimes an academic unit, sometimes an office” (learning partnerships manager)

  • Turning this to advantage eg not being seen as associated with specific agendas

  • Sense of being ‘under the radar’

• Reflected in “invisible workforces” (Rhoades 2010) and “secret managers” (Kehm 2006)
Spaces

• Safe space in which to be creative/experiment eg work-based research; programmes of study; support of senior figure/mentor but also

• Lack of organisational checks and balances

• Sense of struggle/tension (the ‘dark side’)

• Working with given structures for practical purposes, but also critiquing them

• May be outside mainstream communication channels...

• Political dimension?
Knowledges

• Contextual, cross-boundary knowledge: “It’s not enough just to know how to be able to be an accountant… or to manage staff… in order to be effective within a university you need to understand the context” (faculty manager)

• Applied, evidence–based institutional knowledge eg research into student outcomes or own practice
Knowledges

• From 'data' to 'knowledge':

“My role isn’t just to present data but to try to interpret data... through policy analysis... timing, politics, the media you use, the way you communicate it, is probably even more important than the actual findings of an analysis” (Institutional researcher)

• Contribution to body of knowledge in higher education as academic field
Relationships

• “if you get the relationships right everything else falls into place” (learning technologist)

• Lateral team working across hierarchies

• May lead in one setting, be led in another

• ‘Partnership’ rather than ‘management’

• Internal and external networks: 'weak ties'

• Becoming 'multi-lingual', interpreting between different constituencies
Legitimacies (status)

• Status of Third Space work:
  • “I’m a director but not a director… the extent of my authority is unclear…” (enterprise manager)

  • “There’s no authority that you come with” (planning manager)

  • “It’s what you are, not what you represent” (partnerships manager)

  • “I’ve had to create my own role, find my own way into systems... force my way into meetings, rather than wait for someone to ask me to contribute” (learning technologist)
Legitimacies (authority)

• Credibility built via non-positional authority

• Appreciating attitude of academic colleagues that "If you solve a problem for us, we'll come back and work with you again" (teaching and learning manager)

• Understanding different academic and professional work "rhythms" eg approach to timescales, budgets

• Ability to participate in "disinterested debate"
Paradoxes and dilemmas

• ‘Safe’ and ‘risky’ space

• Academic credentials but ‘non-academic’

• Politically aware but neutral positioning

• People-oriented but diffident about 'managing'

• Differential perceptions of
  × power of academic and professional staff
  × the individual and the collective...

• Third space only recognised by those within it...
• When does Third Space become mainstream?
Possible responses

• Recognition in workload models/promotion criteria of *Third Space* work

• Support of senior person/mentoring/coaching

• Flexible career pathways

• Development opportunities via eg secondments, internal consultancy/work-based research, publications, links with eg HE policy unit

• Responsibility on individuals as well as institutions…
Adding value

• It can be argued that *Third Space* roles:

• Support academic roles eg raising the quality of the student experience, sourcing funding, building social capital in the community

• Provide experimental or exploratory space

• Release mainstream academic staff to focus on teaching and research in their discipline *but*

• Onus on individuals to demonstrate this

• May also be advantageous not to be too explicit...
Question

• Are we all 'Third Space' now?