

Forging effective partnerships in the third space; Empowering people to respond to the ever-changing face of Higher Education

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Abstract

The Covid-19 global pandemic placed an unprecedented strain on Higher Education Institutions to rapidly respond and adapt, pivoting teaching and learning from traditional face-to-face models to fully online, and subsequently, hybrid delivery as restrictions eased. The stability of the entire sector was tested and many educators, through hard work and effort, successfully adapted their teaching to adopt online pedagogies (Carlson, 2020). Of the many lessons learnt from the global pandemic; one that must be acknowledged is that the risk of further unexpected, sector-wide disruption is real and could further challenge the responsiveness and adaptability of Higher Education.

The 'third-space' between professional and academic spheres of activity offers dynamic new working practices for the higher education sector (Whitchurch, 2013). Partnerships within the third space have implications not only for identities in HE, but for management and leadership development. Third space partnerships offer a cross-boundary collaborative working practice, drawing together diverse talent, skills and knowledge which could well bear dynamic solutions to unexpected disruptors, as seen in the collaborative efforts between teaching academics and learning technologists through the Covid-19 pandemic.

How do we empower staff to have the autonomy to seek out co-operative partnerships and develop third space working practices? This paper will explore both institutional practices, and the individual experiences of third space working to change the shape of the HE working environment in response to disruption, and how these lessons must continue, developing the culture of collaboration, in order for institutions to remain agile in the face of unanticipated challenges.

Keywords: Third-space, Collaboration, Partnerships; Higher Education

Summary

Higher Education Institutions are still continuing to progress through adaptations, adjustments and difficult transitions in response to the Covid-19 global pandemic. This sector-wide disruptor will certainly not be the last significant challenge that disrupts the stability of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), be it from governmental

changes impacting the economics and internationalisation of HE, technology threatening academic integrity, or workplace demands requiring dynamic upskilling of the workforce (OES, 2022). The benefits afforded to HEIs that adopt and encourage cross-boundary and cross-discipline collaboration can be seen as a strategy for tackling unexpected disruption and the integrated practitioner in Higher Education can be seen as strategy for future-proofing leadership, strategy and outcomes (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022).

Through semi-structured interviews with those working in and enabling third space working practices, this paper identifies institutional examples of supporting third space working and highlights individual experiences of cross-boundary collaborative partnerships. Examples of recognising skill and rewarding cross-boundary working provide strategies for enabling third space collaborations as a strategic preparation for unexpected disruption.

Background

Third space professionalism is a concept developed by Celia Whitchurch. The concept of third space professionals describes those that work in the space between academic and professional spheres (Whitchurch, 2013). Blended professionals (Whitchurch, 2008) are individuals that work in an academic way, whether that is or isn't reflected in their job-title, role and contract and who bridge the gap between professional services and those on academic contracts. If we define academic working as; identifying a challenge, reading and researching the current literature, critiquing and evaluating said literature, and then synthesising new knowledge to contribute to the field; then there are many academic activities that take place within a Higher Education Institution by those traditionally working on professional service contracts. This is often highlighted in the practices of library staff, educational developers, learning technologists and those involved in the development of quality processes and policies, however, may well extend to any professional service departments.

Whitchurch also described third space environments as projects or pieces of work that aren't confined within firm boundaries, for example communities of practice. This type of working culture and environment describes collaborative partnerships, across job-roles and boundaries, with members of staff who are experts in their field. For this to work effectively, the culture of collaboration must be nurtured, supported and developed.

The pivot towards digital education in 2020, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, was a perfect example of a third space collaborative effort between teaching staff, digital education specialists and learning technologists, who came together to solve this challenge of continuation of teaching and learning in an online context. The knowledge and experiences of technology were developed to enhance learning and online teaching, which has been a potential theme for collaboration, however the change in 2020 emphasised the value placed on the work of digital educators and

learning designers. Those HEIs that fared well during the shift to remote and online teaching and learning were those that worked collaboratively with learning technologists to ensure that their teaching, their course, their students got a positive learning experience. The experiences of learning technologists, and the advancements from the team of digital education developers at Lincoln was a significant change from transactional requests of support, with their role becoming more central and integrated in the delivery of teaching. Requests for support through partnerships, became more of a collaborative conversation centred around “how can we work together to make this work?”. In essence, Covid-19 was a disruptor which changed peoples’ perceptions of value on the work of professional services.

An Insights report based on a workshop with Higher Education leaders, concluded with a clear statement; sector-wide disruption is inevitable (OES, 2022). Embracing diverse perspectives, creativity, partnerships, and bold strategies to change the culture of how we work are strategic approaches to responding to the ever-changing face of Higher Education. Challenges that are already evident include positive action to decolonise curricula and pedagogies, an increased focus on employable graduates, and the recent emergence and availability of generative artificial intelligence. There is no doubt there will be further unanticipated challenges ahead. With these pedagogical dilemmas, potential solutions lie in effective collaborations with third-space professionals in the Library, the Careers department and learning technologists, and if so, why wait for a major disruptor to embrace the culture of cross-boundary collaborative working?

Discussion

The use of six semi-structured interviews with a range of colleagues working within and enabling work in the third space has highlighted examples of practice that promote collaborative partnerships, often challenging roles and boundaries. The term ‘partnership’ can imply a degree of equality; there is a tendency to partner and collaborate with our immediate peers, those with the same or similar roles to us. In contrast, cross-boundary partnerships often involve a power dynamic, certainly in pay grade, and so there is a need to consider strategies for parity. Parity in a partnership involves an agreed balance of inputs, not necessarily the same, but where the inputs of both partners are valued equitably (Cook-Sather and Felten, 2017).

Two approaches to developing and supporting this culture of collaborative working practice are evident within institutional examples, through the recognition of skills, and reward for cross-boundary collaboration.

Recognising skills, knowledge, expertise, or “bridging skills” (Denney, 2022) is crucial to constructing partnerships or teamwork. Staff leading degree apprenticeship programmes for example, place immense value on the work of apprenticeship administrators, who bring knowledge of funding, eligibility, skills scans, end-point assessments, and more. Under the scrutiny of Ofsted inspection and funding audits,

the utilisation of this necessary knowledge is central to the successful running of apprenticeships. The formation of hybrid teams capitalises on bridging this gap. Examples at the University of Lincoln include the Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching (LALT) as a central academic development department and the Eleanor Glanville Institute as the University's strategic lead for equality, diversity and inclusion. These hybrid departments are made up of professionals, researchers, academics, course leaders, administrators and post-graduate supervisors.

Another strategy to promote the recognition of talent and skills is cross-boundary mentoring. The conscious development of key processes such as annual appraisals, recruitment, mentoring and CPD with the recognition of third space working practices will yield fruitful rewards for all involved, both mentor and mentee (Shotts & Shaw, 2022). One comment that came from an associate professor was that third-space professionals are in a “unique position to easily cross disciplines and start to break the age-old criticism of academia that we always work within our discipline silos”, referring specifically to digital education staff. This concept was also echoed from third-space professionals in the library that described opportunities to work ‘cross-discipline, cross-role and cross-institution on external projects’ as being particularly rewarding. This cultural challenge is evident in the hybrid department the Eleanor Glanville Institute where siloed working is reduced through ‘shared ownership of projects and sharing of work, leading to shared credit’. The department makes use of ‘group supervision’, combining staff on both contract type, with the aim of ‘gaining wider views and approaches to problems’.

The second approach to developing a culture of cross-boundary partnerships is the reward and recognition of this collaborative practice. The significance of reward and recognition is of particular interest because the academic promotion route and career route for professional service staff are different, where career progression for third-space professionals may be less direct and explicit compared to colleagues on academic contracts. The head of a hybrid department described the task of re-grading roles being the only alternative for promotion within professional service contracts as “possible but with significant challenges”.

Examples of reward and recognition, such as co-authoring a paper or being a co-investigator on research bids, were evident within hybrid departments, however third space colleagues in science technical departments have commented on grant applications being exclusively for academic roles. Equally, leadership of a hybrid department described the need to ‘submit an extensive business case and fight to recruit academic posts’ into what is technically a professional service department. Such artificial barriers inhibit the co-creation and development of work and should be addressed. An example at the University of Lincoln is exhibited in Teaching Excellence Awards which are inclusive to all staff who teach and have been updated to not be restricted to those on academic contracts. Following this approach, the Post-graduate Certificate in Higher Education teaching development programme at Lincoln is inclusive of all staff who teach, providing essential recognition and development for professional service staff that play a central role in teaching our

students. A course which was also designed in the third space as an equitable partnership across the academic and professional service boundary.

Since teaching and learning, is the common ground that unites University staff across boundaries, the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) (Advance HE, 2023) becomes a valuable framework for facilitating this type of conversation because it articulates the common ground on which we can evidence our work. Furthermore, the presence of senior professional service staff in the Library, LALT, and the Digital Education department who have achieved Senior Fellowship (D3) status, acknowledges this commitment to teaching and learning and challenges the dated barrier of fellowship being targeted at those on academic contracts. Those in a position to empower others to work collaboratively, should consider how skills can be bridged, what reward looks like, and whether the PSF can be utilised as a common ground framework to align priorities and goals.

Outcomes and Impact

Facilitating, developing and nurturing third space working practices is a culture shift towards cross-boundary collaboration. Through the creation of sustainable spaces for partnerships, the culture becomes centred around parity, grounded in skills and knowledge. Embedding sustainable partnership beyond discrete projects and initiatives requires that working and learning in partnership becomes part of the culture and ethos of an institution (Healy *et al.*, 2014). As a result, staff that adopt this approach are well prepared to engage with students as partners, be it through student engagement initiatives or teaching and learning development (Carey, 2022, and Ody, 2022). This ethos of partnership can be seen embodied by the Student as Producer model which emphasises the importance of establishing and developing partnerships and collaborations between academics and students, (Neary and Winn, 2009), and continues to promote student agency in identifying and pursuing meaningful participations with academics over a decade later (Strudwick and Johnson, 2020). The more effectively we work together, the higher quality the outputs of our work, the better the student experience. This is clear in the integration of technology in teaching and learning, the impact of the library in the learning journey, and many more initiatives across the institution.

The impact of an institutional adoption of third space working practices is also evident in working groups and communities of practice, with examples at Lincoln including the Consumer Rights and Digital Accessibility Oversight group and a newly formed working group to address the use of artificial intelligence. The emergence and availability of generative artificial intelligence has raised uncertainty over the academic integrity of some assessment practices and has triggered yet another rapid response. The integration of learning designers, teaching and assessment specialists, computer scientists and colleagues involved in quality and policy are collaboratively working, with parity and an 'ethic of reciprocity' (Cook-Sather and Felton, 2017). The culture of cross-boundary collaborative working in the third space

is enabling agile responses to significant challenges to Higher Education at the University of Lincoln.

Conclusion

In the ever-changing face of higher education, where there are pressures and challenges that have the potential to disrupt the sector, failure to respond and adapt to the changing environment is not a viable option. The sector-wide response to Covid-19 has demonstrated without any doubt the capability of working flexibly, adaptively, and collaboratively. Furthermore, the power and impact of cross-boundary, collaborative partnerships has been exhibited. New challenges presented by generative AI, and the next, unexpected challenges yet to reveal themselves will continue to push the HE sector towards innovative solutions that require the strengths, skills and expertise of a diverse workforce. Why wait for a disruptor, when we can develop our collaborative working culture right away and embody that culture embedding partnerships with our colleagues and our students. Those that are in positions to recognise and empower colleagues to work in a space that crosses boundaries, roles, disciplines; should make the time and space to do it, reward it and nurture it. Recognition of skill and talent should exhibit itself through cross-boundary working groups and working environments and cross-role mentoring. Rewarding cross-boundary working can be effectively achieved through the removal of barriers between academic and professional service spheres of work. The latest strategic plan for the University of Lincoln is underpinned by guiding principles including 'working collaboratively', and 'challenging each other', within a 'One Community' collective mindset (University of Lincoln, 2022). The active pursuit of third space partnerships and cross-boundary collaborations is an apt embodiment of innovative working practices that challenge existing norms for the continued development of higher education.

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