

## Reconstructing Identities in Higher Education: The Rise of *Third Space* Professionals

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Dr Celia Whitchurch  
Lecturer in Higher Education  
Institute of Education, University of London  
[c.whitchurch@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:c.whitchurch@ioe.ac.uk)  
[www.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.ioe.ac.uk)



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- *Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures* (2005-2007)

([www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.htm](http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.htm))

- *Optimising the Potential of 'Third Space' Professionals in UK Higher Education* (January-December 2009)

([www.lfhe.ac.uk/research/smallprojects/  
ioefinalreport.doc](http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/research/smallprojects/ioefinalreport.doc))

## *Third Space Contexts I*



### *Literature on professional identities:*

- Increased specialisation
- 'Professionalisation'
- 'Exclusion' from academic community

### *Literature on academic identities*

- Series of binaries:
  - Academic/'non-academic'
  - Collegial/managerial
- Exclusion from 'management' agendas

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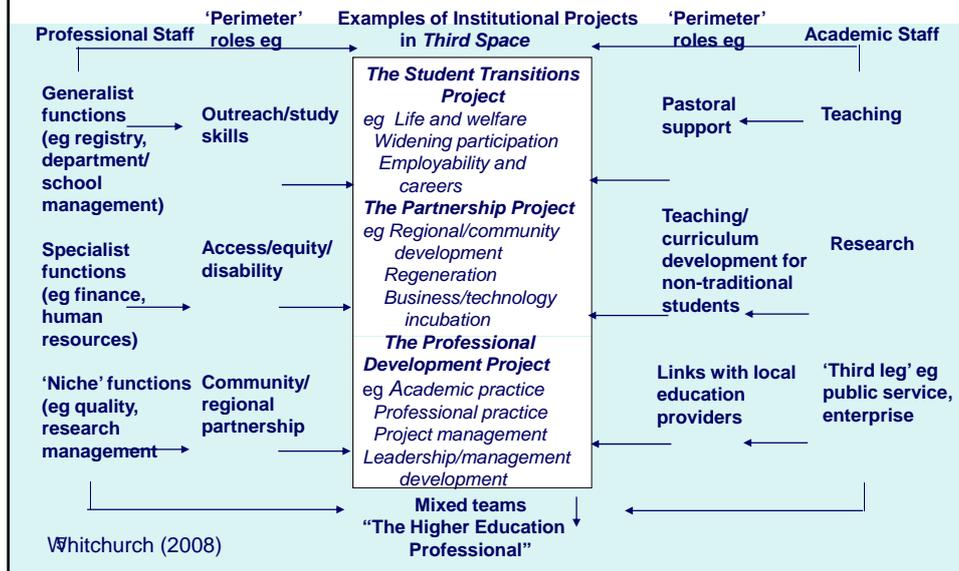
## *Third Space Contexts II*



- Situation more complex and dynamic:
  - Increasingly diverse and mobile workforce
  - Partnership working (internal and external)
  - Blurring of boundaries
- New cadres of staff:
  - Professional staff with academic credentials
  - Academic staff with interests in projects such as widening participation and new modes of learning

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# The Emergence of *Third Space*



## Theorising "Third Space" I

- Concept from sociology/cultural theory:
  - "A dynamic, in-between space" in which "cultural translation" takes place (Bhabha 1990)
  - Activity not constrained by unitary set of "rules and resources" (Giddens 1991) from one or other space
  - "A creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives" (Soja 1996)

## Characterising *Third Space* professionals



Via:

- The spaces they occupy
- The knowledges they construct
- The relationships they form
- The legitimacies (sources of authority) they develop
- The languages they speak

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## Space(s) I



- Plural, dynamic space with a “double edge” (Bhabha 1994)
- Ambiguous conditions:
  - “Sometimes an academic unit, sometimes an office” (learning partnerships manager)
  - Turning this to advantage...
  - Working with given structures for practical purposes, but also critiquing them

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## Space(s) II



- Safe space in which to be creative/experiment *but also*
- Sense of struggle, challenge and tension
- The 'dark side' of Third Space
- Lack of organisational checks and balances
- Therefore "living on the cusp, to deal with two contradictory things at the same time without either transcending or repressing that contradiction..." (Bhabha 1995)

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## Knowledges I



- Applied, evidence-based Mode 2 knowledge eg research into recruitment trends, student outcomes
- 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)
- "we try to bridge this divide between 'let's keep the academics happy...' [and] developing activities elsewhere... you can't have a finance director who is just number crunching..." (finance manager)

## Knowledges II



- Transforming 'information' into 'knowledge' via interpretation and presentation:
  - “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)
- Higher education as an academic field (conferences, published papers...)

## Relationships



- Lateral team working among senior/junior staff
- Less division between 'managers' and 'managed'
- People managing at earlier stage of careers
- 'Partnership' rather than 'management'?
- “if you get the relationships right everything else falls into place” (educational technologist)
- 'Weak ties'/networks (Granovetter 1974)

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## Legitimacies I



- Credibility likely to be built on a personal basis:
  - “There’s no authority that you come with” (planning manager)
  - “It’s what you are, not what you represent” (learning partnerships manager)
  - “... I’ve had to create my own role, find my own ways into systems and force my way into meetings, rather than wait for someone to ask me to contribute” (educational technologist)

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## Legitimacies II



- Ability to participate in disinterested debate:
  - “learning to divorce argument from people” (teaching and learning manager)
- Anticipating likely responses:
  - Different academic/professional work “rhythms”
  - Applied, Mode 2 activity seen as “trade” or “dirty” work...
  - 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)

## Languages I



- “you’ve got two different groups of people often talking two different languages” (educational technologist)
- Multi-lingual, understanding and interpreting between eg educational, socio-economic, market discourses
- “Only when you combine multiple views of the same situation can you understand the whole picture and identify those areas that are important” (educational technologist)

## Languages II



- Being able to use language that will be understood and accepted by client group:
- “I call it management development, but what I say and what they say are two very different things” (staff developer)
- Also developing new language that expresses contemporary agendas around eg partnership, creativity, project work, teamwork, networking, institutional and professional development

## Example: An Employability Manager I



- Worked with local employers to improve graduate employment and with academic colleagues to integrate employability into curriculum: “we... do... development work with [academic staff] in terms of their own practice, linking with the modules, and [helping them to] understand what employers are looking for”.
- With students, offering time and space in which to develop transferable skills

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## An Employability Manager II



- Acknowledged but worked through resistances: “it’s no use me saying ‘we’re at the bottom of the league tables... our students haven’t got [the highest grades]...”
- Overcame negative perceptions about students from non-traditional backgrounds
- Raised aspirations of all three groups, providing eg research opportunities for own team: “I offer people places they wouldn’t normally go to”

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## Challenges of *Third Space*: For individuals



- Lack of structure/checks and balances
- Status of boundary work eg for promotion
- Risks in getting out of ‘mainstream’?
- Inappropriate reporting lines...
- Career pathways: “I’m not sure what type of professional I am any more” (student services manager)
- “I’ve always tried to take the next step in another area, so that it moves you forward” (teaching and learning manager)

## Challenges of *Third Space*: For institutions



- Relationship with mainstream activity (informal vs formal structures)
- Encouraging creativity while maintaining oversight
- Preventing projects developing a life of their own or being too dependent on one individual (succession planning)
- Appropriate mix of identities/employment packages

## Possible responses to *Third Space* Challenges I



- Recognition in workload models/promotion criteria of eg community and partnership activity; developing new funding opportunities
- Support of senior person/mentoring/coaching
- Development opportunities via eg secondments, internal consultancy, work-based research, attachment to eg higher education unit
- Flexible career pathways
- Responsibilities on individuals as well as institutions...

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## Discussion



To what extent can and should *Third Space* activity be ‘designed in’ to institutional structures and processes, and to what extent can and should it be allowed to occur ‘bottom up’?

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