An overlooked EDI issue… can valuing the diversity of third space professionals support a more sustainable future in higher education?

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Abstract

Do teaching-focused colleagues in the higher education (HE) sector feel they belong? Or do they often feel like misfits who challenge the status quo by not conforming to traditional academic stereotypes? In this short opinion piece, we explore the complexity and diversity of roles held by third space professionals in teaching-focused roles and the impact this has on their sense of identity, belonging, and value. We argue that there needs to be a concerted effort to grapple and genuinely engage with this thorny and deep-rooted issue, to enable these colleagues to feel they are included and valued in their institutions and across the sector.

Given the dynamic and turbulent context within which UK HE is operating, recognising the diverse talents and expertise of third space professionals could support the sector to respond to future uncertainties by unlocking untapped potential. Whilst for some this may seem counterintuitive – to be diluting the traditionally understood role of an academic – it may be essential to help institutions modernise and creatively meet new challenges. Third space professionals occupying teaching-focused roles can provide unique skill sets, offer alternate perspectives, problem-solve, and enable effective communication with stakeholders which will help to ensure a more sustainable and positive future.

Keywords: third space; teaching-focused; HE; EDI; alternate perspectives; misfits.

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Introduction

This opinion piece draws upon our reflections as third space professionals and teaching-focused academics within a Russell Group (research intensive) Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the UK. Having chosen to come to our roles from varied backgrounds (including professional practice, industry and pre-clinical and clinical research) and being proud and committed to being employed on teaching-focused contracts, we bring diverse expertise, skill sets, viewpoints and passions. Drawing on our own perspectives alongside those of colleagues across the sector (National Learning and Teaching-focused Network, 2024) we suggest that it is precisely because of this diversity, that teaching-focused colleagues can bring important, fresh and alternate perspectives. If supported to belong and to feel genuinely empowered and valued, we argue that teaching-focused colleagues could support and lead their HEIs to confront the significant challenges that the sector faces (PWC, 2024).

Much has already been written about the value of third space professionals (Whitchurch, 2008, 2013; Veles and Carter, 2016), yet in many HEIs they remain invisible (Akerman, 2020) and misunderstood (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). This may be in part due to the difficulty of seeing them as a well-defined group because they often have many diverse characteristics and attributes which do not neatly fit or align with the often rudimentary role/contract descriptions that many HEIs have. Their inherent diversity could lie at the heart of why they can typically feel as though they do not fit. These colleagues can often be described as 'unbounded and blended professionals and portfolio-specific' (Veles and Carter, 2016. p.522) working with and across institutional boundaries and collaborating across multi-disciplinary teams.

This sense of not fitting can be exacerbated because there is no universal, effective and well understood metric to apply to the variety and complexity of work which they undertake (unlike the Research Excellence Framework as a metric for research) - there is no one size assessment or way to measure their contribution which appropriately and effectively fits all. Indeed, teaching orientated activities, institutional projects and innovations can often be perceived to be lower in status and of lesser value, and consequently can warrant

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less recognition in comparison to administrative or research tasks (Young, 2006; Ramsden, 2009).

Why third space professionals are key to rethinking HE

The reality of the increasingly precarious position that HEIs in the UK face is clear (House of Lords, 2023; PWC, 2024). This is a consequence of a range of interrelated factors including, but not limited to, a broken funding model for universities, a rapidly changing and uncertain global context, technological advances, the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic and an evolving student population who have diverse needs and aspirations related to how, where and when they study (PA, 2023). This calls for a reconceptualisation of what universities can and should be, and who they serve – demanding the need to think differently, to reinvent and revitalise (Corrall, 2022; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022; The British Academy, 2022).

Whilst this context is inevitably worrying, and will no doubt bring with it significant and far-reaching change, it may also present a unique and exciting opportunity for many third space professionals. From our experiences many of these colleagues have changed careers and such significant pivots bring alternate perspectives and an experience of change that if leveraged may be able to support, catalyse and embrace this reconceptualisation of the sector. This is because of the unfamiliarity they typically have with established ways of working and that through looking at things differently they can bring benefits by making ideas more explicit and accessible and in highlighting their practical relevance. By the virtue of their unique and rich skills sets (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2021) and their propensity to be collaborative, agentic, committed to their own learning and the learning of others, and not constrained by established practices (Veles, Carter and Boon, 2019) they may be able to promote adaptability, agility, determination and resilience. These are attributes third space professionals often hone through having to constantly prove their worth, resist being dismissed or overlooked, apply their expertise in a variety of contexts to meet expectations and therefore be chameleon in nature.

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Misfits and disruptors

The innate diversity of third space professionals means they are often viewed as non-traditional academics (Whitchurch, 2013; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). They often bring a natural curiosity, questioning why practices are as they are, alongside a desire to create meaningful change through a student-centred approach. However, this outlook can have difficult and sometimes unpalatable consequences as it can position teaching-focused colleagues as being challenging and questioning of the status quo, and their perspectives can be viewed as deviating too far from historical and institutional norms (Bennett et al., 2018). They can be seen to be pushing the boundaries, creating change and can be relentless in their need to understand the underpinning rationales for why things are done in the way they are, making some feel wary of them. In addition, as some teaching-focused colleagues come from a range of backgrounds outside of academia they may lack a familiarity regarding how and why particular processes and practices work in the way that they do (Bennett et al., 2018). In all these ways they can often unwittingly disrupt – which in turn can leave them feeling like misfits or disruptors – itself a lonely and isolating experience, provoking feelings of not belonging, feeling valued or seen (Gretton and Raine, 2017; Bennett et al., 2018).

However, we suggest these teaching-focused colleagues should be proactive in taking ownership of how they can and want to meaningfully contribute to their institutions and the sector, even if there is no clearly defined pathway. This could help to overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation. Seeking out other like-minded misfits can help to build a sense of community. Being part of an inclusive community, getting to know like-minded colleagues both within institutions and across the sector, can make a difference to individuals and in changing perceptions more generally. It can help colleagues to grow in confidence, to act, make change, and ultimately to positively disrupt for the good of students, the educational remit and excellence of their institutions and the sector at large.

An Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) perspective

A commitment to EDI means, in the most straightforward of terms, fostering cultures where all individuals feel safe and belong, and in doing so are enabled to fulfil their potential

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(UCL, 2024). Below we outline what this might mean for these third space professionals and what may need to be considered in terms of: Equity (rather than equality), Diversity and Inclusion.

Equity (rather than equality)

Whilst equality is no doubt important, in this context striving for equity is essential. This is because equity recognises the importance of different circumstances and situations and works to allocate resources and opportunities to enable an overall equal outcome. Equity is about fairness of treatment, access and opportunities. It means working to eliminate barriers that have previously inhibited or excluded participation and requires a commitment to tackling ways of working and processes in institutions to ensure that they are fair for everyone (Minow, 2021).

Therefore, HEIs should specifically consider third space professionals and their roles by:

- Clarifying the nature and purpose of these roles.
- Building shared understandings across and at all levels of their institution, without being too constraining, of the breadth of contributions the roles can provide.
- Committing to not simply borrowing practices and processes from more established or well understood career pathways, but intentionally designing them and their associated systems, to be equitable.

Diversity

Key to diversity in HEIs is an unwavering commitment to diversity of people alongside diversity of thought through actively working to prevent group think which can inhibit good decisions from being made. We argue this requires pro-actively seeking out and embracing alternate perspectives. Third space professionals can be helpful in this context precisely because they often question the ways things are done and want to understand the underpinning rationale for why things are done in the way they are – creating 'dialogic "third spaces[s]" which can be innovative sites of collaboration and contestation' (Bhabha, 2012, pp.1-2 cited in Jones and Milton, 2024, p.8). Third space professionals can encourage a way of working that privileges an enquiring and questioning stance or

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adopting 'enquiry as a way of being' (Milton and Morgan, 2023, p.1072). We suggest this should be a central, innate and fundamental part of practice and can support the institutions to reinvent themselves and be agile in facing a more rapidly changing and dynamic future.

Inclusion

Being meaningfully inclusive is about consciously committing to, developing and sustaining an inclusive culture and expecting all staff to work inclusively in all aspects of their daily practice - in everything they do. Milton and Morgan (2023, p.1078) argue this is 'central to privileging caring relationships that are foundational to inclusive and ethical practice' and can be exactly what makes it so challenging as it needs to be practised and persistently worked at to become habitual and an embedded practice.

Fung and Gordon (2016, p.20) highlight that leaders have a significant role to play in 'promoting or contradicting the message that teaching and education leadership are core to the academic mission and identity'. Leaders at all levels need to work pro-actively to make educational practice an equally included and valued activity so those whose roles are orientated to teaching and education also feel valued and included. Simple but powerful examples could include acknowledging teaching and education-orientated successes as explicitly as research success and/or supporting the professional learning of colleagues equitably regardless of contract type or role. The reason this is essential is that individual practices and associated ways of working are profoundly shaped by what leaders do (Brennan and King, 2022), so the 'nature and quality of what is modelled' is vital (Milton and Morgan, 2023, p.1078). We suggest that being meaningfully inclusive which is essential to creating belonging in our institutions – for all staff – privileges genuine listening and a commitment to foster caring relationships. What is modelled in this regard is likely to have a long-lasting legacy as it is always being observed and therefore influences and shapes the practice of others.

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Conclusion

The current climate in which HE is operating seems unsustainable and we argue that recognising the unique contributions of third space professionals could help to reinvigorate the sector. But to do this, third space professionals must be treated equitably, the diversity that they bring must be recognised and valued, and they must feel genuinely included to be able to flourish and help to advance the change that the sector desperately needs.

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