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Play space – head space – third space: playful pedagogy and research – ways of building collaborative and creative communities of learners

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Abstract

This bricolage untext constructs a meditation on third space professionals, practices, and opportunities. We, the authors, have reflected on our own past contributions on the topic – and contributions from some friends and allies – in blogs and articles, in books and activities – and playfully selected those that at this moment we like the best, that we find the most provocative, intriguing, or useful. To carry third space practice further, rather than writing a summative reflective piece drawing together our thinking in a suitably formal and dense academic piece, we have cut up what we have written – we have blacked out the blogs and PowerPoint sessions of others – and we have put these together to create a new story: that explores the creation of 'third spaces' and immersive activities as pedagogical practices for powerful student learning. A story, as Jean Luc Goddard would say – with a beginning, middle, and end – but not necessarily in that order. Thus, our text is an untext and an unspace – a metonym, a synecdoche, a provocation.

Keywords: third space; learning development; bricolage; untext; creativity; pedagogy.

Introduction

This paper tells the story of how we, three dispersed third space professionals, navigate the education landscape and ecosystems within which we operate. We reveal through re-

visiting some of our publications how we work, research, and write together, building collaborative and creative communities of learners through playful practice and ludic research. Separated by time and space, we navigate national, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries and embrace the challenges and benefits of collaborating across these diverse spaces. We argue that collaboration creates opportunities for third space individuals to gain professional and personal empowerment and agency (Abegglen et al., 2023) and increases the visibility of third space professionals (Hall, 2022), but most importantly creates powerful liberatory pedagogic spaces for students.

The story we tell is not only unconventional but also unconventionally presented: an 'untext' bricolage building on some of our creative third space and learning development musings produced over time. Bricolage is a technique that particularly spoke to us for this piece: it stresses the importance of using the resources at hand, recombined to gather new insights and make new meanings. An extension of our approach to collaborative writing as a method of inquiry (Gale and Bowstead, 2013), this is collaborative bricolage. A collage experiment undertaken as we re-visited, chopped up, and re-positioned our original thoughts (see Wheeler, 2018) to gather new insights into third space and the potential offered not just for Learning Development (LD) – but for liberatory pedagogy.

We open this untext bricolage with our blackout poem on third space based on Helen Webster's (2018) blog post which we presented at the Third Space Symposium 2023 and further reflected on in a #Take5 blog post for the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (Burns et al., 2023). We trip over another #Take5 from 2019 where we connected third space opportunities not just with LD and embedding LD in the curriculum - but with the opportunities for learning created by Second Life (Burns and Sinfield, 2019). We continue by taking playful extracts from some papers that we really enjoyed writing and that all referenced third space: 'opening doors and crossing thresholds' (Myhre et al., 2022) which we wrote with students who became colleagues and that takes the 'in-between spaces' of the university as a starting point. Reflecting in partnership with students from our 'third space' module: Becoming an Educationist (Burns et al., 2019). And 'It's learning development, Jim' a piece that we wrote for the JLDHE, re-visiting Lea and Street, 20 years on, that explored embedding and expanding learning development in Higher Education (Abegglen et al., 2019). We conclude the untext with another blackout poem constructed from a presentation by Hazel Messenger (2024), delivered to the Higher Education Research Group (HERG) at London Metropolitan University in January 2024, in

which she reflects on 'boundary-spanning practice' and that further inspired our thinking about third space. We conclude our argument with a segment from our edited book on *Collaboration in higher education* (2023), for it was referenced in the Call for Papers, and it leads neatly into a drawing together of our arguments.

We selected these pieces because they reflect our thinking and 'doing'; they map our ways of working with and for students, and the academy more generally. Webster (2018) lays out pithily the porous and flexible nature of third space – how it morphs and expands to give voice and agency to students with and within the constraints of the academy. With the 'shipwrecked shore', covered in the #Take5 blog, we reveal the way that virtual spaces like SecondLife can be literally inhabited differently and more powerfully with and by students… which in turn led us to develop our playful module, Becoming an Educationist (Becoming). As with Gutiérrez (2008), we promote the notion of playful and critical academic literacies as a third space whereby students see themselves and what they can achieve differently. We spin from that into 'crossing thresholds', quoting the impact on students when they reflect on and feel the power of the third space for themselves. From here we cite 'third space partnerships', which both covers a project that we took forward with our Becoming students and also offers a powerful argument for the need for third spaces within and across the curriculum – especially if we want equity for non-traditional students. This gave us the confidence to write 'It's learning development, Jim' where we extended the Lea and Street (1997) seminal article that offered a taxonomy of LD practice, moving from 'study skills' through 'socialisation' to 'academic literacies'. In each domain, we suggest that the truth is more complex than that and what we need is a third space within this argument – a liberatory approach that sees the power and potential of learning strategies, communities of practice, and of literacies beyond the traditional academic essay. Suitably then, we swoop into Hazel Messenger's (2024) PowerPoint covering the boundary spanning and transgressive nature of the third space and the third space professional…

Thus, we have set the scene for this piece. From here, we dive into our selection of writings – highlighting how third spaces can be created and what they can do within the classroom – creating an argument for a different, more inclusive, and empowering higher education pedagogy.

The whole university is curriculum space

Extract from #Take5 #98, Blackout Poem created in response to Helen Webster's (2018) work/blog post: https://aldinhe.ac.uk/take5-98-sharing-the-third-space-symposium-through-blackout-poetry/

Many models positioned the different forms of provision along some kind of continuum or axis associated with the curriculum, one to ones and generic sessions being outside the curriculum, and sessions embedded as part of the module, or indeed study skills modules as a whole, firmly within it. This sparked off a reflection for me – I found that I reacted quite strongly against the idea that one to one provision is *outside* the curriculum. I also found it interesting that we often disagreed about where to place things, or how they linked. I wondered if we were conflating conceptual spaces with physical or institutional ones – that one to one provision is thought of as outside the curriculum because it takes place outside the students' normal classroom   the space in which the curriculum is taught, or is institutionally further away from academics, the owners of the curriculum.

On one level, there's an obvious objection to this – due to increasing student numbers, we have central timetabling, and students are no longer taught only in their 'home' spaces as I was, but in whatever space is suitably sized and laid out all over the campus. To an English Literature student, would my office in the library be much different from the lecture theatre in Engineering or Medicine that's the only one big enough on campus? Or peer mentoring or online provision that might take place in a hall of residence? The whole university campus is now curriculum space. Or is it that institutionally, learning developers are positioned differently as we're often not on academic contracts- so the more closely we work with 'real' academics, the more 'legit' our provision is positioned as? Are we bringing students into our professional identity crisis?!

On a more conceptual level, though, I reacted against the idea of one to ones being outside the curriculum because of the nature of the conversation in one to ones. Again and again in feedback on one to ones, students mention how tailored the provision was. Which is odd, as I know nothing about chemical engineering, dentistry, architecture or business management! But if I am putting into practice the listening, coaching and mentoring roles of the Four Roles Integrated model, or applying the 5 Ps of LD to help the student examine their own learning in context,

Third spaces in real life, in SecondLife, and learning development

Extract from #Take5 #37, responding to Burns et al. (2012), 'The Shipwrecked Shore': https://lmutake5.wordpress.com/2019/11/21/take5-37-the-best-way-to-embed-learning-development/ (Burns and Sinfield, 2019).

> To facilitate active student learning and engagement, we worked with the students in a range of different spaces. We took the students to the British Museum to research their topics; we engaged in interactive workshops in real life (IRL) … through dynamic play rather than didactic instruction; and in SecondLife (SL), the 3D virtual world that we were using, learning happened not in realist, mimetic representations of classrooms or lecture theatres. Rather we created a student 'building zone' in SL so that students could actively create and build their representations – and inhabit their own learning spaces and their own learning in more powerful ways; finally, we built a seashore complete with beach and susurrating sea, as the reflective learning space.
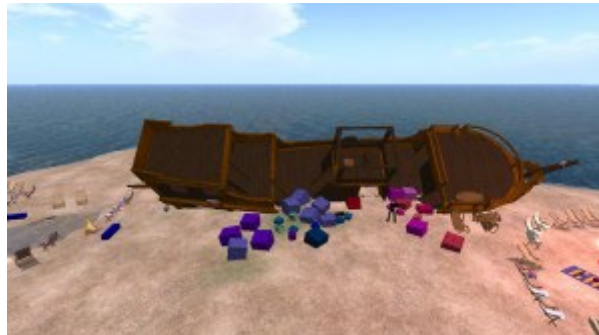
Pic: Our Galleon on the SL beach – with the deckchairs

> Students reflected on their learning IRL via brief writing patches, classroom conversations – and via formal presentations. Reading was facilitated by collaborative working on textscrolls and the writing was scaffolded by free writing activities. Students as their avatar selves also reflected in SL 'sitting' in deckchairs around campfires, solving gnomic puzzle cubes and investigating the mysterious galleon that we shipwrecked when we wanted to deliver them additional thought-provoking 'supplies'.

Our space

And it was amazing to see how the students occupied and made, especially the virtual, learning spaces their own. On entering SL, even if they had never used that space before, they entered with more confidence and panache than they tended to enter the real life classrooms. Rather than be intimidated or to suffer in embarrassed silence, we observed students asking for help and saw the more experienced 'gamers' help the 'newbies' build their avatars and construct their objects.

The avatars themselves were also revelatory. The common misconception is that the anonymity of social media spaces encourages deception, or the hyping of an idealised self. However, we saw students inhabit this space differently: not building 'perfect' representations of themselves but making 'flawed self' avatars – or something more playful: a Klingon, a female sea captain, a bumblebee.

Pics: Sandra Avatar (okay – I went for an idealised self!) – and the student Klingon avatar

We observed (judged against previous 'skills' modules) that the creative project stimulated real student engagement and that the positive self-representations and activities in SL spilled over into RL such that their playful learning, their presentations and eventually their academic writing were all undertaken with more confidence and style.

In conclusion

In SL and IRL, we worked to represent study and learning as active, fluid, engaging and, together with the students, created participative knowledge-landscapes in the real and virtual worlds in which we operated.

We saw that the alternative spaces were indeed inhabited alternatively, playfully and powerfully by these first year students. They collaborated, they explored, they built. They claimed, occupied and transformed their own learning places; making their own marks on the educational 'landscape'.

Pic: our student on the poopdeck of the representation she made of HMS Beagle (note – it's floating in space).

Crossing thresholds and becoming whole

Extracts from Myhre et al. (2022):

(p.154): We are educational nomads wandering through (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2005) already colonised academic space (Freire, 1970) …

(p.155): being "invited in" forged a connection and built a positive identity … "Like a lighthouse beacon through the mist, unseen by other ships, it was the most inconspicuous doorway which led me to working with Sandra S. and Tom. Upon the stairwell door a laminated sign stated "staff only." I still remember vividly traversing through the university library past the cafe and its flumes of coffee drinkers and unwitting bystanders to that doorway. Like Alice looking down the rabbit hole, I was unaware of the journey ahead. I think I remember it well because I was purposeful and anxious, whereas previously, my return to university education as a mature student had been markedly aimless and disengaged. Eight years away from higher education had left me little more than a severed appendage - disconnected, sore, and jaded. The lift to the third floor (the location of Tom and Sandra's office), was arguably the beginning of my regeneration, of becoming whole again as a constituent part of an academic institution. Their door was open. I was welcomed into the conscious lifelong pursuit of understanding and discovery, the quintessence of higher education. By inviting me behind the scenes, through sharing of their physical and intellectual space and bestowing me with faith in my competency and knowledge through dialogue, Tom and Sandra S. opened up a terrain of possibilities which has led me to become a lecturer and an academic (albeit green) myself."

Third space partnerships in and across the curriculum

Extracts from Burns et al. (2019):

(p.61): Learning development sits in the space between academic and professional practice, between staff and students, and between educational institutions and employers (Whitchurch, 2008). This liminal work involves "teaching, tutoring, research, and the design and production of learning materials, as well as involvement in staff development, policy-making, and other consultative activities (Hilsdon, 2011, p. 14). Thus, learning development is a "third space" profession (Whitchurch, 2008) in the way that it "works in partnership" with students (Association for Learning Development in Higher Education, 2018; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014) where students and staff actively engage in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2014). [...]

The LDer is not there to tell the student how to do the work "properly," but to listen, to discuss, and to work with the student to decode the assignment and decide how to tackle it with understanding and power. This dialogic encounter (Bakhtin, 1981) "flattens" the hierarchies of the relationship, creating something much more porous and much more welcoming: a space of opportunities. This co-created space has third space potential – the potential for something to happen.

(p.62): Soja's (1996) theorization of third space and Shields' (2004) analysis of Henri Lefebvre's work (2003; 1991) reveal the liberatory potential of the space occupied by LDers and students. It is a space where the negative striations of normal academic power relations can be swept away (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) – together, student and LDer can (re)define the space and can inhabit it more powerfully. Webster (2018) describes this as a space where boundaries are fuzzy and malleable, and hence a space that can expand and morph to accommodate the needs of those involved as well as those of the broader environment. It is a space occupied with students and, at its best, it is defined by joint goals and outcomes.

(p.65): Given that the third space is the space of potentiality, of the liminal and the unmapped; given that it is the street fighting and nomadic space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of education, we would argue that it is essential that all students are given the sorts of third space opportunities that we have described here in our case study and that are doubtless discussed elsewhere in this Journal. Moreover, we argue that it is especially essential for the so-called "non-traditional" student to have the opportunity to take up these opportunities. These students are the ones who persistently experience educational rebuff, who are labelled as deficit and stereotyped as "less than"; these are the students for whom we attempted to create third space opportunities both within our Becoming module and the [extra-curricular] project. However, these are the very students who whilst they make the time for projects such as these – and they do – pay the highest price for taking that time away from their formal academic studies.

It's learning development, Jim – but not as we know it

Extracts from Abegglen et al. (2019):

(p.3): Ours is a much more rhizomatic model: one that offers multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) and that embraces uncertainty (Cormier, 2012). It is the collective 'Third Space' (Bhabha, 2004) where by 'being with' you start to 'become' or, as Soja (1996, pp.56-57) said, "where everything comes together . . . subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history." Thus, our Becoming module welcomed and honoured our diverse non-traditional students for the people they already were as they engaged in the process of becoming the academics that they wanted to become. We therefore argue for holistic and inclusive learning and teaching approaches that enable students to find their own voices in the exclusionary, competitive and often hostile higher education environment.

(p.6): Educationists might argue that what we have done in Becoming is simply good curriculum design. Our argument would be that whilst this is true, it is only true because the module was designed to be emancipatory and empowering: something to inspect, laugh at and jump off from (Sinfield et al., 2019). The challenge is to make a case for such a module when the macro-culture within higher education is increasingly focused on the bottom line: NSS scores and League Table positions; student employability and staff salary-reduction targets that need to be reached. This reductionist vision asset-strips creativity from courses …

After the ink dries: the research story so far and upcoming

Extract from Messenger – with Bloisi (2024), Blackout Poem created from PowerPoint presentation:

The expansion and diversification of academic work
- Rise in 'boundary spanning' for academics

Boundary spanning work
- Boundary spanning work is '*a set of communication and coordination activities performed by individuals within an organization and between organizations to*

integrate activities across multiple cultural, *institutional and organizational* contexts'
(Schotter, Mudambi, Doz, and Gaur, 2017:404)

- In HE… sectors, institutions, employment groups, subjects, curricula, level of study, countries, type of student, delivery model, relationships with stakeholders, location, time zones……

- Known variously as for example, 'Academic Link Tutors'; 'Academic Partnership Leaders'; 'Partner Academic Contacts'; 'Academic Liaison Tutors'….. these are the academic 'go-betweens' linking a university with their academic partner

- 'Boundary spanning' or '3rd space' professionals (Whitchurch 2013); 'working in a 3ʳᵈ space' vs '3ʳᵈ space professionals' (Whitchurch 2022)
- Boundary spanning work creates a boundary zone and involves multiple interactions (Butler, Zander, Mockaitis, and Sutton 2012). A transaction space (Gibbons 2005; McMillan 2015) that shifts perception from translation across boundaries to dialogue across boundaries
- May result in the creation of a new, hybrid space…'3ʳᵈ space'; a new 'joint field' (Whitchurch 2013; Levina and Vast 2005)

Characteristics of competent boundary spanners (Williams 2002, 2012)
- managing networks
- building effective personal relationships with a wide range of other actors
- managing in a non-hierarchical decision environments through negotiation and brokering
- performing as a 'policy entrepreneur' to connect problems to solutions
- mobilising resources and effort in the search for successful outcomes (Williams 2002, 2012)
- *Little research on processes and* effectiveness

Boundary objects
A boundary object spans different social worlds, enabling communication between them (Star and Griesemer 1989).

Boundary objects may transform in practice

Practice and boundary work (Mode 3 knowledge)
Whitchurch (2022, 2023)
- Working in a third space' vs Third space professionals'

Levina and Vaast (2005)
- Boundary spanners vs Boundary spanners-in-practice
- 'Boundary spanners' are those who are involved with the boundary zone (the joint field), but do not operate in this zone in practice. They may influence practice in the boundary zone eg through policy, management decisions, resources made available etc
- They may create obstacles to practice

- Boundary spanners-in-practice negotiate meanings, create relationships and create a new joint field, partially transforming their practice to accommodate the other

Operationalising collaborative academic practice 'after the ink dries':
the experience and motivation of academic link tutors

Working in the boundary zone: The Collaborative Work Model (CWM)….working title

What's it like?

Complex interplay

Responses
- '…seeing how much work is involved….someone who hasn't worked in that role might not realise that….you are an outsider..this is one person who is going to deal with..so many people, students as well as staff.'
- 'It's not a main role, it's an additional role, another thing to do'.
- …'allows engaging in something beyond the routine of teaching'
- 'The university sees the role in terms of cost…the [partner] as representing the university'…
- '..it [needs] a heightened level of professionalism..acting as a representative and adviser'.
- …'we had a very strong personal and professional relationship'…
- ..'they think I am the main point….[the university] see it as a non-important role…just going out and enjoying'..
- ..'it's like taking a foreign burden to them'…and 'being responsible when things go wrong'..
- ..'it takes time..it's a challenging role'..
- ..'I have to hold two areas together..twoorganisations from different perspectives'…
- ..'.a relationship which is based on give and take'…

The 'Treademic': a fluid role at the nexus of collaborative academic activity

The Academic Link tutor as a 'Tetrademic'
- Academic Link Tutor is a 'tetrademic': *'an academic who is at the nexus of collaborative academic activity, carries multiple academic identities involving multiple boundaries simultaneously and who manages a complex interplay between them' (draft definition)*
- Often demonstrates a deep commitment to the contribution that TNE makes to communities
- Considers the development of good relationships with multiple communities and individuals to be fundamentally important
- Offers 'support and challenge' in multiple situations
- Experiences role stress (emotional labour, role ambiguity and role conflict)

Next steps….
- The role as boundary object–in-use: how do meaning(s) evolve in situated practice?
- How does boundary spanning competence emerge in practice? (Using Activity Theory)
- How does the organisational context contribute to creation of 'working in a 3rdspace' vs 'third space academics'? How do those involved in influencing 'boundary spanning' affect 'boundary spanning-in-practice'?
- Expand the concepts and Mode 3 knowledge associated with the 'Tetrademic'
- Consider the impact and management of role stress (emotional labour, role conflict and role ambiguity)

- Explore the usefulness of the Collaborative Work Model in other collaborative contexts (eg Knowledge Exchange Partnerships, intraorganizational partnerships….)
  Contribute to HE/University policy and practice with regard to staff development, career structures and recognition

And leaping forward: final thoughts: collaboration in HE

Through this bricolage untext we have continued our exploration of what 'third space' is and what it can do, for ourselves and importantly for and with our learners. As we argue in Abegglen et al. (2019), *Collaboration in higher education: a new ecology of practice*:

> (p.1): Our overarching narrative challenges the competitive, elitist and individualistic HE status quo whilst augmenting understanding of the potential of a collaborative university that facilitates the humane, 'backstage' and 'third spaces' in which all academics – staff, students and partners – can 'be' their authentic selves (Burns et al., 2019). Drawing on our own collegiate transgressive practice as 'outsider' academics (Walkerdine, 2020) who research and write together, we have gathered case studies that operate 'against the grain' to outline what might enable isolated and marginalized voices to be heard. There is liberatory potential in these spaces of solidarity, collaboration and trust – to challenge the repressive structures within which we work and study.

In all works and work:

> We saw that the alternative spaces [we created] were indeed inhabited alternatively, playfully and powerfully by [all]. They collaborated, they explored, they built. They claimed, occupied and transformed their own learning places; making their own marks on the educational 'landscape' (Burns and Sinfield, 2019).

Together, these third space texts create a third space themselves: collaborative, creative praxis in an in-between space – a world away from teaching, learning, and assessment approaches where students are plugged in to a remedial package to be 'fixed', staff are route marched through compulsory 'training', and where, for staff and students alike in these Digital Diploma Mills (Noble, 1998), any expression of the self is transgressive and

unwelcome. Here in third space, the social construction of meaning and of knowledge is played out through real and virtual reflections, in enabling spaces, and via a participative, collective endeavour: an untext.

We feel that this mode of writing, of re-visiting our past texts, and of collaboratively inhabiting liberatory LD space within, through, and across those texts offers a very different model of thinking and doing – and of academic writing and praxis. This way of working with such creative and generous approaches helps us also to reaffirm the power of creativity as emancipatory practice and led to our development of a much more creative and ludic approach to LD work – immersive activities as pedagogical practices for powerful student learning: a third space.

Acknowledgements

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Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield

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Licence