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Why is it problematic for technicians to say they teach in higher education?

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Abstract

This article challenges the popular misconception that technicians do not teach within higher education (HE). Writing from their experiences as technicians and educational researchers within the creative arts (Savage) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) (Vere), the authors question why many technicians feel unable to describe their teaching activities as teaching, calling for greater recognition of technicians' pedagogic contribution to the sector, while also arguing that through the activities of teaching, the boundaries between academic and technical roles have become increasingly blurred.

Drawing on Whitchurch's concept of a 'Third Space', the article highlights how political, economic, social and technological factors have transformed HE since the turn of the millennium to establish the conditions in which technical roles and teaching have become increasingly sophisticated and prevalent. The authors argue that academic roles have simultaneously been disaggregated during this same period, exacerbating complexities, tensions, and overlaps that further problematise what was once a straightforward binary between academic and technical roles, challenging orthodoxies, identities and dominant hegemonies.

The authors call upon the sector to formally acknowledge this valuable element of HE and to integrate it not just into the language but into the formal functions, structures, systems and strategies to create a unified space in which academic and technical educators integrate and collaborate to develop curricula and deliver pedagogies that enhance student learning and advance knowledge.

Keywords: technicians; technical; teaching; pedagogy; third space.

Introduction

In this article, we set out to challenge and dispel the widely held falsehood that technicians do not teach in higher education (HE). This outdated belief stubbornly persists in all but the academy's most enlightened and progressive areas and continues to be perpetuated through simplistic stereotypes that delineate academics as teachers from the technicians who provide basic skills training and technical support. The popular rhetoric is 'You don't teach, you instruct' (Guardian Higher Education Network, 2016). While this was perhaps applicable in the previous century, it no longer represents the contemporary reality in which technical teaching has become a sophisticated and integral aspect of student education in many disciplines. This evolution reflects what Higgs et al., (2012) describe as a 'competency turn' in which the epistemological and ontological emphasis of HE has shifted from what students 'know' to what they can 'do'. This transition has been propelled by the policy of successive governments with an overt focus on technical education and skills (Department for Education, 2023) alongside traditional degree courses to respond to employability agendas.

Societal, political, and economic drivers have coincided with the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) that brings new technologies to disrupt our norms and reshape notions of education and work. Combined, these points have established the conditions in which technical teaching has evolved and proliferated. Additionally, technicians can represent comparatively 'cheap labour' to replace under-resourced academic teaching communities (Wragg et al., 2023, p.1) as the sector struggles to balance declining finances with heightened expectations.

However, despite evidence to the contrary, institutions still commonly regard technical teaching as formulaic and didactic and described as demonstration or instruction. Yet, this linguistic slipperiness conceals a paradox: technicians teach in HE and do so within institutions that rely on their teaching while simultaneously sustaining systems, cultures and discourses that deny they teach. A participant in a forthcoming study (Savage, 2024)

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described experiencing this phenomenon as "gas-lighting".

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) (2012) defines the word 'teach' as 'to give information about a particular subject…to show someone how to do something'. Teaching is a fundamental element of most technician roles and, indeed, the core function of hybrid technical teaching roles which have become prevalent in the sector. Technical teaching has evolved and expanded beyond the archetype 'demonstration' to include sophisticated and progressive pedagogies that introduce and build technique, know-how, confidence, aptitudes and abilities. So, why is it problematic for technicians to claim they are teaching?

We respond to this question using Whitchurch's concept of a 'Third Space' (2008). The answer to this deceptively innocent question is clear, but to talk about it without inhibition offers a potentially unpalatable challenge to the orthodoxies and identities of HE that Whitchurch's third space problematises so effectively.

Rise of the technicians

Our interest in technicians began around the same time (the early 2000s) and developed in similar ways, both culminating recently with doctoral research. Savage explored how creative arts technicians conceive of their pedagogies (Savage, 2024), while Vere examined the emergence, enactment and impact of the Technician Commitment (Vere, 2022). A core commonality of our experience is of technicians being regarded as 'second class citizens' (Feldman, 2008), 'neglected' (Barley and Orr, 1997), or, as McLaren and Dent put it more recently, 'highly significant, but often invisible' (2021).

Motivated to change the narrative and culture for technical staff in HE and research, Vere established the Technician Commitment in 2017, a UK sector wide initiative to advance visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability of technical skills, roles and careers. By 2024, over 120 institutions had pledged their support. The Technician Commitment has unlocked inward investment for the technical community within these institutions, along with further external investment in significant sector projects funded by Research England and partners: TALENT, and the newly established UK Institute for Technical Skills and Strategy.

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In the largest-ever survey of HE technicians completed to date, TALENT (2022) published the open secret that technicians were designing and delivering teaching activities and, for the first time, provided a sense of scale. Wragg et al. (2023) extended the Commission's findings concerning the creative arts, in which 95% of technicians described being involved in teaching (compared with the sector average of 81%). The Commission described how creative arts technicians blurred the lines between academic and technical teaching duties (TALENT, 2022, p.130). This blurring is not a new phenomenon, and The National Committee of Inquiry into HE made the same point in 1997 (Education in England, 1997, p.32). A few years later, Smith et al. (2004) described technical teaching in HE as 'quasi-teaching', resonating with MacFarlane's (2010) derogatory notion of 'para-academics'. However, the idea of there being 'a line' (albeit blurred) that distinguishes non-academic teaching from academic teaching is becoming increasingly problematic. Pre-2000, technical teaching was relatively simplistic, and its purpose was to save valuable academic time from repeatedly teaching the same skills and techniques. Once trained in the basics, developing novices would be passed to the elite academic practitioners to teach the discipline's finer skillsets and mindsets. Increasingly, this is no longer the case; the technicians *are* the expert practitioners. Many have post-graduate degrees, and a sizeable proportion have teaching qualifications (Savage, 2019). This accords with Whitchurch's assertion that non-academics can hold academic credentials paralleling their academic colleagues (2013, p.52). However, gaps in the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reporting concerning technicians (Noyes, 2024) prevent this from being an explicit metric, though we can gain a glimpse of this reality through the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) statements of institutions. Analysis by AdvanceHE reveals that just under a fifth of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) referenced the pedagogies of technicians while staking their claim of teaching excellence (Bradley, 2018).

During the same period that technical teaching has elevated, it has been argued that academic roles have become disaggregated (MacFarlane, 2010), deskilled (Newall, 2021) and subjected to the 'terrors of performativity' (Ball, 2013) as they have transitioned from what some, such as Tight (2010) describe as the 'golden age of HE'. So much so that while we argue that it is problematic for technicians to describe themselves as teachers, it seems some academics, too, feel this same unease. Fortnum and Pybus (2014, p.4) reported (in a study of fine art academics) that some 'had come to feel a certain suspicion or inadequacy when using the term 'teaching' concerning their roles. A preferred term by many of the speakers was 'facilitating' or 'guiding'. It seems plausible that technicians are

hesitant to speak about stepping into a new space. In contrast, perhaps the academics in Fortnum and Pybus' study were cautious about stepping out of a previously familiar one.

Technicians in the third space

Whitchurch's third space provides a means of mapping and theorising the territories between professional and academic spheres. It aids us in exploring the knowledge, relationships, legitimacies and languages of those with blended roles (Whitchurch, 2013) while offering a space to accommodate paradoxes and tensions and to chart the changing identities in HE. Whitchurch's model was developed around non-academic staff working in academically adjacent fields, such as learning development, widening participation, learning support, community partnerships, etc. It has been visualised by some, such as Caldwell (2024), below:

Figure 1. Venn diagram – third space model (Caldwell, 2024).
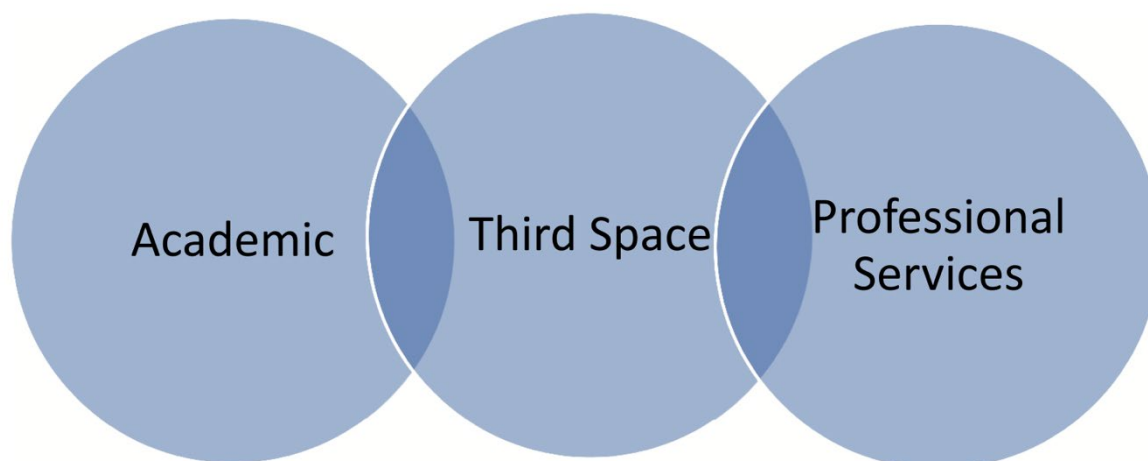
HESA categorises technicians within the non-academic staff classification of 'Associate professional and technical occupations', but from the perspective of the third space, technicians are located within 'Professional Services' (though Whitchurch does not explicitly reference them in her work). In a previous study of technicians transitioning into academic roles, Savage (2018) found the model to be non-representative of technicians with teaching responsibilities and adapted the model to a Synchronous Space (Figure 2) in which academic and technical pedagogies overlap and co-exist.

Figure 2. The synchronous space (Savage, 2018).
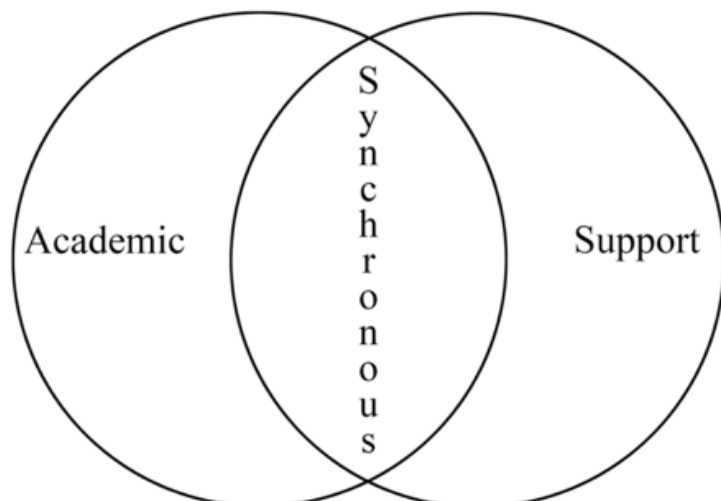
Thought of in this way, contemporary technicians align with Whitchurch's (2009) concept of the 'blended professional,' defined as dedicated appointments spanning professional and support domains with academic credentials but on non-academic contracts. Perhaps the critical differential from other 'blended' roles is that, at the vanguard, technicians are devising curricula and enacting pedagogies that deliver the learning objectives and assessment criteria while engaging in quality assurance (monitoring and governance) and quality enhancement (for example, teaching observation schemes). This is problematic for the third space because, as Caldwell (2024) points out, the term 'non-academic' has historically been used to define staff who do not teach, but technicians clearly do, hence the blurring of lines with academia. Yet, academic roles do more than teach. In his commentary on what he describes as an unbundling of academic roles, MacFarlane (2010) describes how 'Teaching, Research and Service' comprise the tripartite elements of an academic role. We have described how technicians encroach into teaching (and teaching excellence). Technicians' contribution to research is also attracting recognition (McLaren and Dent, 2021; TALENT, 2022), and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is consulting on the inclusion of technical staff and their research activities and outputs in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2029, through a proposed increased weighting on People, Culture and Environment, alongside the inclusion of technical staff as the creators/authors of research outputs. Through enhanced visibility, inclusivity, and participation, the technician's contribution to university life and service is also expanding.

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Conclusion

In light of our narrative and the evidence base upon which it draws, this piece's title and corresponding question appear quite ridiculous. However, while recognising that technicians are teaching in HE might appear inconsequential, the answer to our question speaks to the heart of the problematic categorisation of the HE workforce as 'academic' and 'everybody else' (non-academic). Whitchurch foresaw the dissolution of this binary decades ago, and many others continue to do so. This point threatens and potentially disrupts deeply held beliefs, dominant hegemonies, identities, and paradigms because if we accept that technicians are teaching, then it highlights the array of activities traditionally considered academic that contemporary technicians routinely engage in. Similar points have been raised in relation to other professional support roles such as learning developers, academic skills support and careers (Bossu et al., 2018), librarians (Romany, 2023) and roles that span, blend, blur, or bridge conventional HE job families such as 'integrated professionals' (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). And as the tripartite pillars scaffolding the status quo look increasingly unstable, the historical hierarchies that have enshrined the 'specialness' of academic roles, in comparison to technical and professional services roles that enable academia, appear increasingly outdated and unsustainable.

For technicians to be able to describe their teaching as teaching, it must be accepted and recognised at the highest level (HESA) and within everyday parlance within the academy and made explicit in formal documents such as job descriptions, job evaluation schemes, appraisals, course handbooks, timetables, learning and teaching strategies, and so on. Once acknowledged in language, the educational contribution of technicians can be defined, described, delimited, studied, and improved. Work is already underway on this front; two new PgCert courses for technicians will launch in September 2024 at the University of Nottingham and the University for the Creative Arts.

When accepted, technical pedagogies can be valued and more effectively integrated with academic teaching to promote constructively aligned curricula (Biggs and Tang, 2009) to enhance student learning (delivered by a unified and collaborative team of educators). In this vision, technicians are no longer in the third space; instead, there is a single space in which conceptual, theoretical, and practical educators coexist and collaborate respectfully and with a parity of esteem while advancing knowledge and, teaching and supporting learners.

Acknowledgements

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