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Pedagogical content knowledge as a model for academic development practice in the third space

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Abstract

In this opinion piece, I make the case for the use of Shulman's concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge as both a practical and philosophical approach to academic development work in the third space. I argue that a PCK-like model allows for the development of relationships with academics that are grounded in mutual respect for one another's expertise and are collaborative in nature and provides guidance for the scope of academic development work. I also argue that using PCK as a model can enhance the credibility of third space workers as we navigate the political and managerial environment of a higher education institution.

Keywords: pedagogical content knowledge; third space; expertise; credibility.

Introduction

Drawing on a decade of literature, Veles, Carter and Boon comment that the increased complexity of modern universities has led to 'jobs, roles and careers that do not fit neatly into either the professional or academic realm' (2019, p.75), but instead occupy a third space (Whitchurch, 2008; 2010) where traditional academic and professional roles are more blurred. I would argue that the concept of the third space is the natural home for academic developers, and that as a community we would do well to embrace it. Academic developers perform a wide variety of roles (Land, 2004; Debowski, 2011) and come from a wide variety of backgrounds into the profession (Harland and Staniforth, 2008; Green and Little, 2016), are classed differently in different institutions and jurisdictions, and there is a wide variety in roles, reporting lines, and formal/informal power or influence.

Veles, Carter and Boon (2019) see third space professionals as natural collaboration champions within an institution. A critical part in establishing communication is the formation of relationships. I would argue that as academic developers, thinking consciously how we set up, maintain, and navigate the relationships among the different people moving in, out, or residing in the third space is key. How do we get an 'in' and how can we be successful in setting up collaborations and projects with colleagues? Whitchurch (2008) argues that credibility within an institution is a key lever for third space professionals, rather than formal (hierarchical) power. Barrow and Grant (2012) similarly note that to be effective as an academic developer credibility is key.

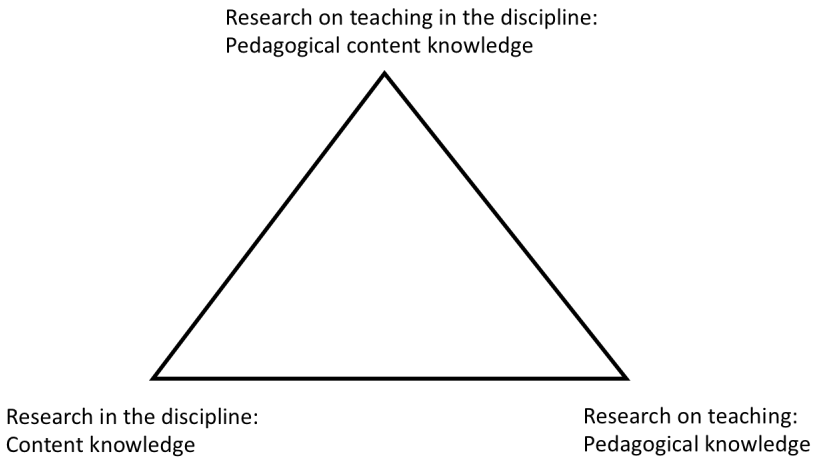
In this reflection, I share a model of practising as an academic developer in the third space. In my 15 years as an academic developer, this model has been very helpful for me in my interactions with diverse colleagues from various disciplines, each with its own praxis and academic culture (Mårtensson and Roxå, 2016). I draw on my disciplinary backgrounds in astronomy and science education, in particular the project team approach used in science, where each team member brings a specific set of skills and knowledge to achieve the project's objectives. This means that establishing outcomes and determining how knowledge and skill sets can contribute is key for a meaningful and productive relationship. This approach tends to be very collegial with mutual respect for one another's knowledge and skills.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge as a philosophical and practical model

In my academic development work, I use Pedagogical Content Knowledge (Shulman, 1986; 1987) as the project team analogy. Pedagogical Content Knowledge is defined as the craft knowledge to mould subject matter into a form suitable for teaching (Shulman, 1986; 1987; Carter, 1990; Doyle, 1992; Van Driel, Verloop and De Vos, 1998) for a specific audience to reach a specific educational objective (Brogt, 2009). My colleague in the discipline and I are two parts of the triangle of Figure 1: they bring the content knowledge (the discipline and the disciplinary culture), I bring the educational knowledge (curriculum design, assessment, teaching techniques), and together we create pedagogical content knowledge, the knowledge of teaching a discipline to a particular target audience, to achieve particular learning objectives. Neither of us can do that alone,

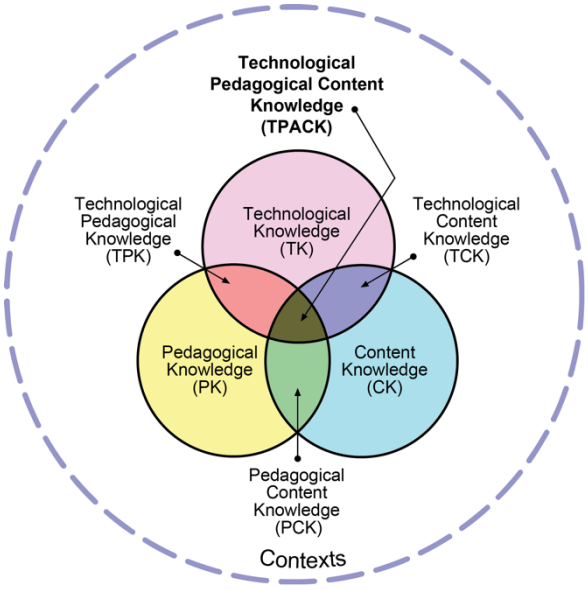
as we both lack full knowledge. We are dependent on one another to complement each other's knowledge to create something that will better serve the students. My colleague also provides critical information about the Teaching and Learning Regime, the signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005), the disciplinary and departmental teaching culture, values, and mores, which can vary considerably from discipline to discipline (for example, Mårtensson and Roxå, 2016). This knowledge mediates what pedagogical approaches might be most suitable. In essence, together we create what Cochran, DeRuiter and King call Pedagogical Content Knowing, which they define as 'a teacher's integrated understanding of four components of pedagogy, subject matter content, student characteristics, and the environmental context of learning' (1993, p.266). Using Pedagogical Content Knowledge as a philosophical model explicitly sets up a peer relationship with the colleagues, driven by mutual dependence.

Figure 1. Schematic of Pedagogical Content Knowledge.



This triangle can be further extended to bring in more areas of knowledge. For example, bringing in educational technology extends this triangle to the well-known Venn diagram of Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (Mishra and Koehler, 2006) of Figure 2.

Figure 2. Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (image from tpack.org).



We can keep extending the model to bring in other specialist areas, such as researcher support from the university's research office, career development support from the organisational development unit in Human Resources, and supervisor development support from the Graduate School, and so on. Combined this leads to holistic, wrap-around support for staff, in line with the discussions in the literature around 'holistic' academic development (for example, Sutherland, 2018).

One knowledge area that is highly relevant to me as an Aotearoa New Zealand based academic developer, is knowledge about Māori culture and customs. Beyond this being critical in my local context working in a bicultural nation within a multicultural world, I find the Māori terms 'mana' (authority, prestige, status, influence) and 'manaaki' (caring, supporting and upholding other people's mana) very helpful in my conceptualisation of academic development (Buissink et al., 2017). This involves upholding each other's agency. It means that an academic development interaction is an interaction of peers. As a developer, I cannot tell a colleague how to teach their subject. Likewise, the colleague cannot tell me what to do (I'm not a service provider). The mutual respect also extends to what is feasible in terms of time, resources, and the goals and ambitions of the colleague on matters teaching and learning. I have to operate within (with a nod to Vygotsky, 1978) the Zone of Professional Development: how far can I bring a colleague along the path to a goal they themselves have set (with some input from me) within the constraints we are working in?

From my experience over the past decade, the co-construction model has been very successful. It meets the academics/academic unit where they are, is strengths-based rather than deficit-based as their skill and knowledge is integral to the co-construction, and (largely) keeps the academic (unit) in control of the journey, which promotes engagement and final ownership of any changes or development.

The importance of credibility in academic development practice

For me, the key to engagement and building credibility with academics in the third space starts with the expertise we have and the value-add we provide. In my experience, what colleagues coming into the third space value is precisely that expertise, which allows us to create tailored solutions to the teaching and learning issues they're facing. In my academic development practice, getting that credibility among the academics is done through strong academic rigour in my work and my (research) expertise in tertiary teaching and learning. It is this focus on (research) expertise that has made me somewhat cautious about the trend toward more 'holistic' academic development (Sutherland, 2018), in particular if a single person or small unit is to have to do it all. For example, I have my specialty (tertiary teaching and learning), so I am not necessarily (academically) qualified to provide researcher or service development, as it is not an area of research or expertise for me. Engaging in researcher or service development would undermine my credibility as an expert with academics. In a PCK-like model, different areas of expertise are needed to provide mutual value-add, and each participant brings their own expertise and credibility in that area. By sticking to our areas of expertise as third space professionals it becomes easier for us to set ourselves up as the peers we are.

A second aspect that in my experience helps building credibility among academics for academic development is being seen as independent and neutral, working to promote good teaching and learning without pushing a particular (political or management-driven) agenda. Because I am not in a department or college (I work for the central university administration), I am an 'outsider', which allows me to deal with (political) academic situations others cannot.

Being a node in the institution's networks in the third space

These two elements dovetail nicely with the concepts from Kotter (2012) about the hierarchy/network duality in organisations. Organisations have a formal structure (the hierarchy or organisational chart), as well as networks, both formal (for example, a cross-functional working group or committee), and informal (one-off collaborations, friendships, acquaintances). As academic developers, we can be located in a wide variety of places within the organisational structures and hierarchy. While we may not hold formal power, we tend to have extensive formal and informal networks across the organisation. I argue that as academic developers, we should embrace our role as nodes in the various teaching and learning research and practice networks. It gives us and our work more visibility, allows us agency in setting up ourselves as peers in a PCK-like collaboration model, and allows us to disseminate good practice around the institution more effectively. In a network, rather than a hierarchy, we are also more inoculated against the conflation of academic development with performance management or pure service delivery, which allows us to focus more on the developmental nature of our roles.

Conclusion

The PCK model has served me well as both a practical and philosophical tool in my role as a scholar-practitioner of academic development. It has given me the foundation on how I set up and maintain academic development relationships with colleagues grounded in mutual respect, helps me determine what is, and what is not in scope for my role, and provides a strong sense of identity as a third space professional.

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