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Trajectory to professorship for third space practitioners: a learning developer perspective

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Abstract

A higher education (HE) professional with a role that spans across the traditional academic and non-academic dichotomy is described as working within the 'third space' (Whitchurch, 2013). Whitchurch (2023) conceptualises the third space as, 'likely to be plural and to be comprised of multiple spaces, which may continually reconfigure'. Therefore, some staff may work permanently or periodically in the third space. I have worked in the third space as a Learning Developer for almost 20 years. During this time, I have been fortunate to progress in my career from an Academic Skills Tutor to Director of Learning and Teaching Excellence. I have co-chaired the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) and am humbled to have received a National Teaching Fellowship in 2020. However, up until around 12 months ago, I had never thought that I could realistically pursue a professorship.

In this opinion piece, I explore the reasons for my preconceptions around professorship and the emergence of new professorship pathways. I consider broad criterion related to a Teaching and Learning (T&L) professorship pathway and how evidence might be obtained by a third space practitioner. Through these reflections, I hope to demystify potential sources of professorship evidence for other third space practitioners. In turn, I hope this will support aspiring third space professors in their career planning. In addition to aspiring professors, I anticipate that the practical suggestions included in this paper will help to support the career planning of third space practitioners who wish to pursue higher education leadership roles.

Keywords: third space; Learning Development; professorship; promotion.

A categorical problem

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2024) overview of staff employment within the UK HE sector reports roles in terms of 'academic' and 'non-academic' categories. Given the transcending status of third space practitioners, such an arbitrary distinction is problematic. Some nuance to the role of third space professionals is potentially afforded through HESA 'academic' employment sub-categories (such as 'teaching only'/'teaching and research'/'research only'). However, these are perhaps misleadingly classified as 'academic' given that many third space professionals may undertake such duties yet be employed on non-academic contracts. For instance, certain Learning Development practitioners or librarians are employed on non-academic contracts and undertake teaching and, whilst not encouraged to research, may undertake that as well.

Advance HE's (2023, p.2) Professional Standards Framework acknowledges '…the diverse practices and roles that contribute to high-quality learning', recognising both the promotion and the supporting of learning in the revised Descriptors. Select universities have introduced more expansive categories to define work undertaken by staff. For example, the University of Leeds (2024) categorises roles as 'academic', 'administrative and clerical support', 'clinical', 'operational support', 'professional and managerial', 'research', 'teaching', and 'technical support'. This serves to potentially better accommodate third space practitioners and is to be commended. However, many institutions continue to adopt the traditional 'academic' and 'non-academic' (or professional service) dichotomy. Unsurprisingly, there is significant sector variation in how third space roles are categorised, even when closely related. By way of an example, on 5 March 2024, two Learning Development related roles were advertised via jobs.ac.uk. A LD Tutor (Jobs.ac.uk, 2024a) was offered on an 'academic or research' contract whereas an Academic Skills Tutor (Jobs.ac.uk, 2024b) post was offered on a 'professional/managerial/support services' contract. Differences in how similar job titles are used and categorised will likely be influenced by where a third space team is based within an institution (e.g. faculty/student support/central teaching and learning unit/library), along with local Human Resources policies for categorising and grading job roles.

I have a PhD but have never been employed on an 'academic' contract. During the 2010s, it was my experience that 'non-academic' contract status meant there was no promotion route to professorship. As such, pursuing a professorship was never going to be an option without moving to an 'academic' position.

Teaching and learning professorship route

Traditionally, universities have well-established sector progression routes to facilitate the career development of academic staff being promoted from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer to Reader to Professor (University of Leeds, n.d.). In theory, such routes would be open to third space practitioners employed on academic contracts. However, given that historically promotion to a professorship was habitually based on research outputs, such routes would likely remain prohibitive to many third space practitioners (and even some academics) by nature of the way their institution defined or limited their work.

In recent years, across UK universities, there has been a progressive introduction of new professorial promotion routes including T&L (see Khusainova et al., 2023). This is perhaps attributable to how the Teaching Excellence Framework and National Student Survey have acted as political drivers to motivate universities to rebalance the significance placed on teaching relative to research. Many institutions now offer a T&L promotion route to professorship (for example, Leeds Beckett University, n.d.; University of Birmingham, n.d.; University of Sussex, 2024). Accordingly, there have been reported increases in promotion to professorship based on T&L impact (Grove, 2023). Whilst the introduction of T&L routes is to be praised, it can be further complicated for third space practitioners whose direct impact on student success may not be recognised by those who still emphasise traditional research rather than teaching or learning or even pedagogic or action research. Hence: '…the progression of individuals along these pathways have not yet enabled the centrality of education within the mission of HE to be adequately reflected' (Hulme and Lock, 2020). As such, what exactly constitutes a T&L professor is still emergent and it will likely be some time until this becomes universally established. Nonetheless, the possibility is now there for those who have impacted on T&L, including those working within the third space, to make a claim.

What might be potential evidence for a professorship application via a teaching and learning pathway?

In this section I outline criteria (not exhaustive) typically associated with a T&L professorship pathway. For each criterion, I consider potential evidence that might be attainable by a third space practitioner.

Strategic leadership in teaching and learning

An aspiring third space professor will almost certainly need to achieve promotion to a senior T&L leadership position. Possible examples of strategic leadership might include:

- Authoring institutional T&L policy.
- Institutional curriculum framework development.
- Authorship of TEF 2023 submission.
- Authorship of Access and Participation (APP) submission.
- Business planning.
- Chairing of T&L Working Groups.
- Member of strategic university committees (e.g. Academic Board).
- Institutional Teaching Excellence Award Lead.

Leadership of teaching and learning teams/mentoring

An aspiring third space professor should seek promotion to an operational team lead position (e.g. Learning Development Team Leader). To consolidate experience, further progression to a directorate or departmental leader role could be pursued.

Evidence of mentoring could be achieved in relation to Advance HE fellowships. To support such mentoring, an aspiring professor should seek to achieve SFHEA or PFHEA status. Similarly, applying for and/or participating as a National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS)/Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE) reviewer will provide insights into scoring criteria and so would support the mentoring of aspiring applicants.

Association/society memberships

Aspiring third space professors should pursue leadership roles within educational associations (e.g. Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE), Association for Learning Technology (ALT), Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) or Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA)) and actively engage with professional bodies (e.g. Advance HE) to build their national and international reputation. Similarly, progressive engagement with different educational associations should be prioritised to expand reach and impact. Many educational associations have dedicated communities of practice which can support the developing of professional networks and provide informal and supportive environments to explore new ideas (for example, see ALDinHE, 2024a).

Record of teaching and learning publications and scholarly activity

This is a criterion where non-academic contract status could present a barrier for a third space practitioner in terms of dedicated time to undertake research along with access to mentorship around publication. Where research and scholarship are not facilitated within an institution, Bishopp-Martin and Johnson (2023) highlight that Learning Development practitioners have often sought to find ways to engage in opportunities beyond their institution, for example through joining communities of practice. As such, many aspiring third space professors will need to be very proactive in terms of creating opportunities to independently engage with research. Examples of evidence might include:

- o Publishing books.
- o Editing books.
- o Publishing book chapters.
- o Publishing journal articles.
- o Presenting work at conferences.
- o Editing journals.
- o Conference proposal reviewing.
- o Organised university T&L conferences.

Impact on student outcomes

There is a growing requirement for institutions to provide evidence of how T&L initiatives impact on student experience and outcomes for TEF applications (Office for Students (OfS), 2022) and APP (OfS, 2023). This provides new and potentially significant opportunities for practitioners to build evidence of the impact of their work. Furthermore, as expectations related to such evaluation become increasingly stringent (OfS, 2019; Transforming Access and Student Outcomes, 2023), the outputs of such activity may often be suitable for publication (in journals such as the Journal for Learning Development in Higher Education) and therefore provide further support for a professorship application. Many aspiring third space professors will be well placed to position themselves to become actively involved in leading and/or contributing to such work.

Internal funding/PhD supervision

As discussed, it is possible that preconceptions related to contract categorisation may negatively impact on 'academic' opportunities automatically offered to third space practitioners. It is therefore critical that aspiring third space professors actively challenge job categorisation inequalities within their own institutions that would prohibit them from building up evidence required for a professorship application. As Hood (2023, p.199) notes, they should '… not be afraid to pursue opportunities they feel are for the privilege of academic colleagues alone'. Aspiring third space professors should seek to bid when internal funding is available. Similarly, opportunities to supervise doctoral students should be pursued.

External funding/collaborative projects

An aspiring third space professor will need to consider potential sources of external funding for which they could bid, along with potential opportunities to participate in collaborative projects. Potential opportunities could include:

- QAA Collaborative Enhancement Projects (QAA, n.d.).
- Research funding (potentially available via some educational associations - such as the research funding offered by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE, 2024b)).
- JISC projects.

Conclusion

In the longer term, I foresee that the sector will become more confident in awarding professorships based on T&L excellence and the number of T&L professors will increase. This provides a fantastic opportunity for third space practitioners, as historic barriers start to be removed both by design and also as a consequence of changing sector policies. There does, however, remain a potentially significant structural barrier for many third space professionals because of job role categorisations. I do not personally think it suitable to campaign for third space practitioners to be universally placed on academic contracts given the diversity of work undertaken. Rather, I have advocated (Briggs et al., 2024) for the need for the OfS and HESA to consult with the third-space practitioners around how to best update role classifications within the higher education sector so as to be inclusive of this growing community. I urge my fellow third space practitioners to both make the most of emerging new development opportunities and to also actively engage in any consultation opportunities to shape the future of role categorisation within HE.

Acknowledgements

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