



Institutional responsibility and third space professionals: a call for structural change to embrace ambiguity

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Abstract

Third space professionals have occupied ambiguous spaces in higher education hierarchies for decades. While this positioning can be fruitful and lead to creative solutions and responses for our institutions in challenging times, third space professionals, by and large, remain structurally marginalised, with limited or unclear access to rewards, recognition and career progression. These limitations can inhibit the volume of third space professionals' voices in debates which challenge dominant understandings about traditional practices in the academy. Based on the findings from a PhD project on the identities and experiences of third space professionals in Australian higher education, I argue that resisting dominant discourses from the margins is a difficult endeavour requiring both the centre and margin to find a common language to engage in critical dialogue. With ambiguous and limited pathways for progression and recognition, third space professionals risk being unheard. Our institutions, therefore, have a responsibility to create formal (and perhaps temporary) classification-crossing opportunities for third space career progression and reward, leading to an amplification of the voices of third space professionals in critical dialogue about their positioning.

Keywords: third space professionals; institutional responsibility; critical dialogue; ambiguity.

Introduction

There are no third space professionals in higher education without higher education institutions. Likewise, it is arguable that the shape and purpose of contemporary universities would not be what they are without third space professionals. Celia

Whitchurch's body of work has elevated and made visible the experiences of these university workers, leading to an emergent body of research (e.g., Veles, Graham and Ovaska's 2023 review of professional staff literature) and recent calls to move third space working 'to [the] centre-stage' (Hall, 2022, p. 26) of university strategic responses to the challenges of the post-pandemic world. These challenges are plentiful and broad, spanning areas such as learning and teaching, student wellbeing and widening participation. While the challenges are not new to the sector, they have intensified post-pandemic, with Hall (2022, p. 26) arguing that 'the critical perspectives of "third space" is exactly what universities require'.

In this opinion piece, I draw on my recent PhD research to both agree with Hall (2022) and to add a layer of complexity to her central argument—an argument that would not need to be made if third space professionals were well-positioned to be heard within the dominant discourses of universities. Hall (2022, p. 26) argues that third space professionals will 'ensure universities adapt and survive as hegemonic discourses are disrupted'. I engage with feminist theorists to suggest that as long as third space workers occupy ambiguous (and by implication, marginalised) positionings, their attempts at dismantling dominant discourses and moving to 'centre stage' are risky. Likewise, our institutions are also at risk of not meeting their challenges if third space professionals remain largely unheard. Therefore, I argue that universities must shift their thinking and take practical structural steps to open spaces for third space professionals to enjoy the rewards, recognition and career progression opportunities of their 'traditional' academic and professional colleagues.

University hierarchies: limitations and exclusions

Workforces in universities are, in general, classified along the binary lines of academic staff and professional staff,¹ and third space professionals can be classified as either academic or professional, even though their day-to-day work may traverse these boundaries. The way third space professionals are classified impacts the access they have to the particular hierarchies traditionally associated with these binary categories.

¹ In Australia, this is the dominant language for describing the classification of staff, however, other terms for professional staff may include 'general', 'non-academic', 'administrative' staff, etc.

Foucault's notion of disciplinary power explains how hierarchies divide, classify and normalise those operating within them, exercising 'a constant pressure to conform' (1975, p.182). According to Foucault (1975), those who do not conform are excluded from the system and its promised rewards. Third space professionals are non-conforming subjects who Whitchurch (2009) characterises as 'cross[ing] internal and external institutional boundaries' (p. 407). They inhabit spaces which resist the assessment and classification regimes inherent in higher education's entrenched hierarchical formal and tacit structures, and thereby experience exclusions, limitations and marginality. As such, I conceptualise third space professionals as ambiguous subjects 'passing through hybridity' (Ahmed, 1999, p. 87).

To illustrate some of the limitations and exclusions experienced by third space professionals, I draw on my conversations with Joanne, an educational developer who, during her career in higher education, has been classified as both professional and academic staff. Joanne talks about the limitations for promotion and career progression for professional staff in her field and how this necessitates choosing to conform for some staff (including herself) who see the opportunities for promotion available to academic staff:

The whole promotion as a professional staff member in this field [...] And it's almost embarrassing to have to say 'Well, no, there's nothing'. You know, [...] it's almost like there's a ceiling—you can become maybe a manager of the team which is what I did, but then what? ... So ... if you like management as a learning designer—if you want to be a manager there're opportunities, but not everybody is cut out to be a manager. And not necessarily wants to be and that's I think when you need to take the decision to go academic or stay professional [...]

And it really is a fork and I remember making that decision quite some time ago now [...] that I was going to do my PhD because I was already a manager and I thought 'Okay, where am I going to go from here?' [...] I really enjoyed teaching and I really enjoyed research—so that's when I made the decision to do a PhD so I could one day get an academic post (Joanne, Interview 1).

However, as an academic staff member, Joanne still experienced limitations to her career progression because of the ambiguous space she occupied in an educational developer role within a discipline-focused faculty. Of her research, she said:

When we do publish, we publish in Education; that wouldn't count [as research] for the faculty anyway, because it's not [discipline area of faculty] (Joanne, Interview 1).

By the time of our second interview, Joanne had moved into a higher-level academic position at another institution because of the limitations imposed on her career progression. She explained:

I think, that if I had stayed put where I was [...] I'd never get a promotion from where I was for what I was doing (Joanne, Interview 2).

Joanne was able to progress her career, yet her ability to be mobile—not the entrenched structural and cultural hierarchies of higher education—was the conduit for her progression. Other participants in my study also encountered the limitations of university structures, resulting in experiences of erasure and misrecognitions of expertise.

The location of burden

As Joanne's reflections illustrate, third space professionals often find themselves in situations in which they must choose to conform to institutional discourses to alter the course of their careers or rely on fortunate life circumstances (such as mobility) to locate other possibilities. Indeed, Whitchurch (2008) implies that much of the burden to search out opportunities falls on third space professionals rather than on the institutions who employ them. She writes that the boundaries (or partitions) she identified through her typology of third space professionals: 'may have the effect of creating a sense of marginalisation and isolation for some individuals, although others, in different ways, are able to use boundaries, or the lack of them, to create new possibilities and spaces' (2008, p. 60).

As Whitchurch (2008) points out, working flexibly across domains and boundaries offers fertile spaces for creativity and opportunity. Yet it also places the onus upon individuals to carve out those spaces to construct the networks necessary for achieving their particular project-oriented or career outcomes. Both Whitchurch (2008) and Hall (2022) (and others, including Quinsee, 2022) have suggested the need for universities to embrace the attributes of third space professionals; however, what is missing is a sustained call for institutions to modify their entrenched structures for reward and recognition. What is missing is a call for institutional responsibility to not only embrace ambiguity but to make room for it in the rigid, transparent (and not so transparent) hierarchies inherent in our institutions.

The im/possibilities of marginality and critique

Foucault's later work conceptualised power as a circulatory dynamic available to all, rather than a repressive, transferable commodity available only to the dominant (Bennett, 2012). Drawing on Foucault, feminist scholars have long argued that difference and marginality is a form of knowledge-power which can resist dominant discourses and produce new and creative ways for the world to be understood (e.g., Braidotti, 2011; hooks, 2015). Despite this attractive possibility, Weedon (1997) warns that resistance to dominant discourses is difficult and may require 'extreme and brave actions' (p. 108). Further, she argues, the social power of resistant discourses can be limited by subjective locations of marginality, which do not have 'secure institutional location[s]' (Weedon, 1997, p. 107), and hooks (2015) describes these locations as unsafe. By their definition, third space professionals do not occupy 'secure institutional locations'; they are ambiguous, in-between; they do not conform.

Examining the risks associated with resistance involves considerations of identification and who is recognisable and able to speak and be heard within 'certain norms that govern recognition' (Butler, 2009, p. iv). As ambiguous subjects with limited access to dominant forms of recognition, reward and career progression, third space professionals may not count enough to be heard in critical dialogue (Butler, 2009). Butler (2009) argues that negotiations for the right to speak must be performed within dominant and recognisable language and domains 'not to ratify its power, but to expose and resist its daily violence, and to find language through which to lay claim to rights to which one is not yet entitled' (p. x). In my study, I argued that third space professionals already look to re-orient, transform or re/constitute the language of dominant discourses in their negotiations to survive a crisis of 'not-being' (Ahmed, 1999) in individualised neoliberalised working contexts. They exercise subtle forms of power which often draw on recognisable language and domains, yet structural limitations to rewards and progression remain. I argue that there is an obligation for institutions to engage in critical dialogue with third space professionals and to look inward and begin to dismantle and challenge their own rigid structures of recognition and their consequent limitations on progression and reward for third space professionals. Failing to do so risks the loss of critical third space voices in conversations about the challenges currently facing the sector.

Recommendations and conclusion

In providing the following recommendations for higher education institutions and their governing and advocacy bodies, I acknowledge that recognition stems not only from structural mechanisms, but also through social dynamics in the workplace often out of the control of institutions. These recommendations, however, largely point to structural changes that universities can control, so that third space professionals, as members of the intellectual community, may experience recognition and progression within a system designed without them in mind:

1. Ensure that existing structural mechanisms such as promotion frameworks and the professional staff level descriptors account for the work of third space professionals so that they can see themselves reflected as valued members of their own work communities who have possibilities for growth and progression. This includes mechanisms for recognising contributions to collaborations.
2. Build in flexibility to structural mechanisms, so that classification-crossing can be negotiated if desired.
3. Leaders of faculties and organisational units within universities should make time to understand the nuances of the work functions across their portfolio and the expertise of all staff, ensuring suitable professional development opportunities which, where necessary, can cross the borders of structural demarcations (Irwin, 2024, p. 228).

Critical dialogue needs a 'common language' (hooks, 2015). My recommendations require institutions to deeply engage with their staff to develop this 'common language'. Third space professionals have borne much of this burden; they have taken risks, negotiated opportunities, and worked with their ambiguity and around structures which do not fully account for them. It seems only fair, and in the spirit of critical dialogue, for institutions to now embrace ambiguity by formally recognising it and rewarding what it can achieve.

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