Partnership at play: empowering student partners to navigate third space

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Abstract

Solent Student Partner Programme is a cross-institutional, third-space project led by the central Education Office at Southampton Solent University in the UK. This case study discusses how we have used kinaesthetic play to support our Student Partners to articulate and negotiate the challenges of third-space partnerships. It starts by outlining our Student Partner Programme in the context of the third-space partnership literature. Then it describes the Play-Doh method that we used to support students to reflect on their identity and experiences as third-space partners. The case study concludes by arguing that play provides an empowering tool for students (and staff) to mould third-space partnerships together.

Keywords: play; third space; student-staff partnership; students as partners.

Introduction

2024 brought new beginnings to the Student Partner Programme at Southampton Solent University. An explosion of organisational hierarchies (Heard-Lauréote and Buckley, 2022) during the preceding pandemic had created new and welcomed conditions for third-space partnership working (Arm, 2024). For the first time since the programme had started in 2020, our Student Partners began co-creating with staff in new 'third spaces' (Whitchurch, 2008) beyond the Education Office where they were employed. As such, a larger team of Student Partners was needed to work on multiple and diverse projects across a range of professional services, including Library and Learning, Student Success, and Graduate Employability. In just four years, our Student Partner Programme significantly upscaled its

recruitment and expanded its reach. With a broader sphere of influence on third-space activity at the university came a greater number of in-between professionals (Whitchurch, 2015) willing to sing students' praises and commend their contributions. In a higher education culture obsessed with measuring performativity (Bamber, 2020), our third-space Student Partnership Programme was getting bigger and better. Or was it?

Something did not feel right. The expansion of the programme into multiple third spaces across the institution had created an emotional distance between the Education Office and what was happening on the ground. We had dropped our Student Partners into the cracks of liminal-space working without knowing how they had landed. Whilst staff and students readily told us about positive project outcomes, the process of third-space partnerships was left largely unspoken. Corridor conversations with students suggested that they were grappling with the identity complexities of cocreating in-between spaces, but they did not have a theoretical framework on which to hang their musings nor the tacit knowledge to navigate them. This case study discusses how we used play (Koeners and Francis, 2020) to support our Student Partners to articulate and negotiate the challenges of third-space partnerships. It starts by outlining our Student Partner Programme at Southampton Solent University in the context of the third-space partnership literature. Then it describes the Play-Doh method that we used to support students to reflect on their identity as third-space partners. The case study concludes by arguing that play provides an empowering tool for students (and staff) to mould third-space partnerships together.

Third-space partnership: our context

Solent Student Partner Programme is a cross-institutional, third-space project led by the central Education Office at Southampton Solent University. Twenty students are recruited on an annual contract into the role of Student Partner to work on a range of education-focused projects across academic departments and professional services. Operationalised through a matrix organisation (Arm, 2024), students receive a programme induction by the Education Office before being deployed to work, in partnership, with staff in different projects across the institution according to interest and need. Projects are varied in focus, intensity, and timescale but involve the Student Partners working with colleagues to co-create aspects of research, policy, and practice in third spaces at the university (see Table 1).

Table 1. Solent Student Partner Programme: project examples.

POLICY	• A University Mental Health Charter	With the Student Success Team
	• The University's Access and Participation Plan	With the Student Success Team
PRACTICE	• Guidance on diversifying reading lists	With the Library Team
	• Guidance supporting development of digital capabilities	With the Learning Design Team
	• Action plans for course enhancement	With the Learning and Teaching Team and academics
RESEARCH	• Focus groups to gather student feedback on the inclusivity of teaching, assessment and course content	With academic teams
	• Analysis of Higher Education Business and Community Interaction data regarding graduates' progression into employment	With the Employability team

Student Partners are purposively recruited from a range of backgrounds to ensure our programme is inclusive of diverse perspectives and voices (Lygo-Baker, Kinchin and Winstone, 2019; de Bie et al., 2021). The Student Partner positions are paid, and students work flexibly around their studies for approximately 5−10 hours per week. Student Partners are typically studying in level five at the university and are recruited to the role in recognition of their learner experience rather than subject perspective (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten, 2014). They come from a wide and varied range of disciplines and have no prior experience of educational development.

The challenges for staff migrating from academic disciplines into educational development are well rehearsed in the literature. Manathunga (2006; 2007) provides a compelling narrative of the outsiderness felt when she first became an educational developer, a profession she describes as 'unhomely'. Her reflections on entering a liminal higher education zone chime with the ambivalences discussed by other third-space professionals (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). As Jessop, Saunders, and Pontin (2018, p.321) explain:

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> On the one hand, as academic developers, we strive to diminish power hierarchies and work alongside and learn from our discipline-based colleagues; on the other, we are accountable to senior managers, intent on ensuring the survival and success of teaching and the student experience within a neoliberal world, with a keen eye on metrics and unit costs. What counts as success in one world is not always seen as success in the other.

This can leave colleagues torn between the conflicting interests of 'managerial quality-assurance agendas and critical, personal understandings of the roles and purposes of educational development' (Manathunga, 2007, p.29). Whilst experienced educational developers may have embodied the tacit knowledge to successfully navigate these 'strange parallel universes' (Jessop, Saunders and Pontin, 2018, p.321), newcomers are often unfamiliar with the unspoken politics of this third-space profession.

When students enter educational development third spaces, they not only have to grapple with the complexities of working in between management and academic spheres, but also the in betwixt of staff and student (Burns, Sinfield and Abegglen, 2019). This third space aims to break down traditional boundaries in higher education and redistribute power, knowledge, and values between staff and students in new ways of working in higher education (Potter and McDougall, 2017). Yet, whilst third-space partnerships set out to empower learners as agents of change, they can have the opposite effect — pushing students outside their comfort zone and into territory which is overwhelmingly lacking in direction and clarity of expectation (Hawley et al., 2019). This vulnerability often goes unspoken in the literature, which tends to prioritise positive partnership outcomes over the uneasy process of partnership working (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Healey et al., 2019). Cook-Sather, Bahti, and Ntem's (2019) plea to give voice to the threshold concepts of pedagogical partnership is a useful reminder that the politics of third space needs to be understood by (staff and) students if 'successful' partnerships are to be formed. As Hawley et al. (2019, p.3) state: 'a rebalancing of the power dynamic between staff and learners is no easy task. It is only really possible where a culture of reflexivity is developed'. This case study presents our attempt at invoking the reflexivity needed to make third-space partnership-working, work.

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All work and no play? Our methodology

The operationalisation of the Solent Student Partner Programme is busy. Twenty students are employed by the Education Office to work in multiple, simultaneously run projects across several departments and services at the university. Following the delivery of an initial Education Office-run induction, Student Partners are deployed to their selected projects to work directly with their Leads and respective teams. The role of the Education Office thereafter is to oversee the people management, administration, and finance of the programme. To counterbalance the day-to-day operational 'grind', a series of workshops entitled 'All Work and No Play?' were designed to provide an opportunity for Student Partners working on different third-space projects to come together to reflect on their experiences in the role. Embodying the principles of a playful university (Koeners and Francis, 2020), the workshops aimed to bring play into the work of the Student Partners.

Play is becoming increasingly utilised in higher education to move away from purely goal-oriented learning and create a safe and fun space for learning for learning's sake (James and Nerantzi, 2019). Playful learning promotes intrinsic education through its focus on 'open-ended, experiential, and affective learning processes' (Holflod, 2023, p.478). Whilst there are wide and varied play interventions in pedagogic practice, metaphorical modelling is still gaining traction as a learning and teaching method. Asking students to create metaphorical models of abstract concepts in their studies can support them to better understand and articulate troublesome knowledge (Meyer and Land, 2006). Lego Serious Play has become the leading proponent in this area, with plentiful examples of its positive impact on critical thinking and reflection (e.g. James, 2013). The use of Play-Doh to model, although less commonly discussed in the literature, offers similar benefits for a kinesthetically playful approach to education (e.g. Stead, 2019).

The 'creativity, immersion, and ways of knowing' generated through playful learning, 'permeate… disciplinary and professional boundaries' (Holflod, 2023, p.478). This makes it a potentially useful approach for bringing Student Partners together (who are working outside their home disciplines and across third-space professions at the university). As Brookfield (2019, n.p.) argues in his review of James and Nerantzi's (2019) book entitled *The Power of Play in Higher Education*, play is 'an insurrectional force that challenges bureaucratized and siloed thinking and practice'. Whilst play is considered a signature pedagogy (Toft Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen and Whitton, 2017) in higher education, less

scholarly attention has been given to play in student−staff partnerships. This case study provides an example of how kinaesthetic play can be used to open up difficult discussions with students about their experiences of third-space partnerships with staff.

In the first of a series of one-hour workshops, six self-selecting Student Partners were introduced to the concept of 'third space' from the scholarly literature (Whitchurch, 2008; Hawley et al., 2019). None of the Student Partners had knowledge of Third Space theory prior to attending the session. Inviting the students to become 'theoreticians of themselves' (Flick, 2009, p.178), we asked them to each make a Play-Doh model to represent what third-space partnerships feel like to them. They worked independently on their models and were individually engaged throughout the activity. Afterwards, the Student Partners were asked to describe their models to the wider group. As a follow up to this activity, the Student Partners worked together to create a Play-Doh model to represent an ideal third-space partnership from their collective perspectives. This involved the students working collaboratively to agree, create, and describe their model.

The Play-Doh models were photographed, and verbal comments were recorded for research purposes. After the workshop, students were asked to review the visual and verbal data they had generated and provide some further reflections, in writing, on the challenges and opportunities of third-space partnerships. The students also provided feedback on their experiences of participating in the workshop. Ethics approval for the project was provided by the Southampton Solent University Research Ethics Committee and informed consent was gained from the workshop participants for the inclusion of their individual, anonymised data in this case study.

Neither here nor there: our outcomes

The Play-Doh activities produced rich insights into the experiences and identities of students in third-space partnerships. Each student created a different metaphorical model to represent the hybridity of their role.

For example, one Student Partner used the metaphor of a bridge to discuss partnership as communicative exchange between staff and students:
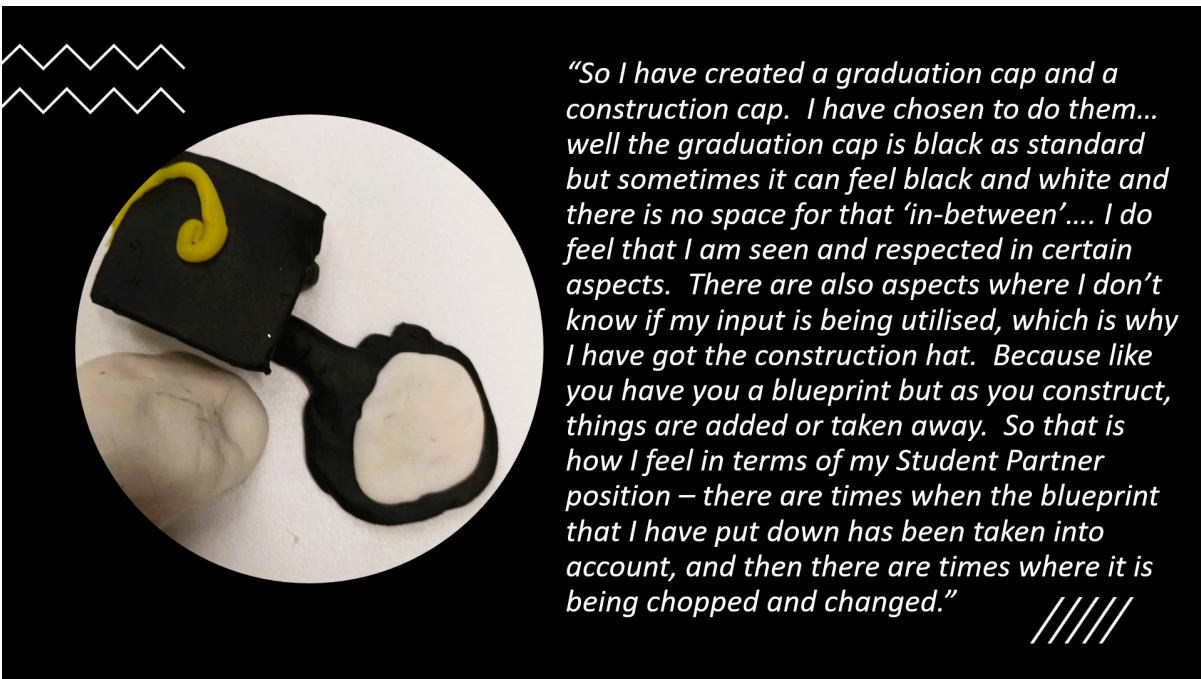

"Mine is a bridge because I feel like we are the bridge that connects students and staff. I think when I saw your Venn diagram of kind of working in that middle space, that's what a bridge represents as well. The students with management so that we can get their views across. Giving an insight on what management thinks and pass those views onto students. I feel like most of the time, as students, we are not really in the know of why certain policies are the way that they are. We are the bridge that connects those two together."

Another Student Partner used the metaphor of a mountain to describe their climb from being a student to becoming a professional in their role.
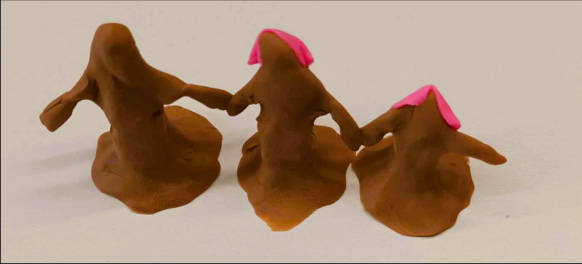
"I did this model of a mountain. And I chose this model because it shows a depiction of each step to the top of the mountain and also going down as well. It has all evolved around Solent University [laughs]. Each step going to the top provides information. It also provides a certain confirmation of yourself, being part of something; like being a better part of the University and the community as well."

Another Student Partner described their identity in terms of wearing two hats at university: a mortar board (to represent being a student) and a construction hat (to represent being a member of staff).

"So I have created a graduation cap and a construction cap. I have chosen to do them… well the graduation cap is black as standard but sometimes it can feel black and white and there is no space for that 'in-between'…. I do feel that I am seen and respected in certain aspects. There are also aspects where I don't know if my input is being utilised, which is why I have got the construction hat. Because like you have you a blueprint but as you construct, things are added or taken away. So that is how I feel in terms of my Student Partner position – there are times when the blueprint that I have put down has been taken into account, and then there are times where it is being chopped and changed."

By discussing their models with each other in a collaborative workshop, we were able to see the diverse experiences of third-space partnership across the Student Partner team. Whilst some of the Student Partners were having very positive experiences in their projects, this was not an experience shared by all:

"I have something very different to say! I made a team because that's how I feel within the projects that I'm doing. Even though I'm a student and I'm in the in-between place – yea I'm the student but I'm also doing the work I am supposed to be doing, they [the staff] are all so supportive and very friendly. And I feel that I'm actually part of something. I feel heard, I feel valued, I feel respected. And I feel like I'm actually, yea, contributing to something. I have a very positive view within the projects I am working."

"Yours are quite cheery. I have gone for an ant. I do feel like in this third space you are bit of a worker ant. You are part of a colony; you are working together. However, my ant is a bit sad – it is squished and it's face-down and it's tired. It's burnt out and it's not with its colony. And that is how I feel as a Student Partner. I feel quite disconnected. I feel quite overworked. And I think I feel like I'm not really sure where I am or where I'm going or what my contributions are doing."

All the Student Partners said that they found the concept of 'third space' useful when reflecting on their identities. They felt that the concept resonated with their experiences and was helpful in describing the role to their peers:

> I had not heard of it [Third Space theory] before and found it the perfect way of describing the role of a Student Partner.

> It [Third Space theory] feels exactly what it is like. It is a very useful visual tool which encompasses how the overlap between student and staff exists.

Giving students a theory to conceptualise their third-space positioning empowered them to understand their role in a more agentic way. For example, Student Partners described the value of the third-space conceptualisation as follows:

> Before I started this job, I was aware that I would not exactly be part of the staff, but also not just a student. This third space makes me feel more comfortable with the position I am in now. It is like a transition phase where I can grow and evolve without the stress of being an employee or the limitations of being a student.

> It gave me the chance to reflect on how I fit in within the teams I am part of; something I had not done before the workshop. I realised that I am not there just as an extra help but as a proper team member — being heard and valued just like a member of staff.

Others described the unique vantage point that Third Space theory positioning offered them:

> It was useful because it shows that as a Student Partner, we are the pillar between being a student and being part of the staff. We see both roles from different points of view that can benefit us and others too within the community.

> It helped me see my unique position as a Student Partner and what opportunities were available for me.

All students agreed that the process of making Play-Doh models helped them to express their experiences of being a Student Partner in new ways:

> Having to create a visual representation of my experiences helped to solidify some thoughts in my head, e.g. that I was capable and that my input is valid.

> I did find it hard to think of a model at first but once I got started it helped me to figure out how I actually felt about working in the third space.

The process of making and discussing their Play-Doh models helped the Student Partners identify and embrace the dilemmas of third-space partnership. For example, one of the Student Partners talked about the ways that they negotiate complex power dynamics to achieve positive partnership outcomes:

"So, my model is three microphones; all different sizes. And they all connect to the heart. I find working in the third space, you have to be aware of your position. And obviously some people are more informed in certain areas. As a student in certain areas, I don't really know anything about a certain topic until someone tells me about it. So when I'm doing projects and stuff, I try to be aware that other people might have more knowledge and therefore should have a larger voice than me. But at the end of the day, we are all working for a good cause."
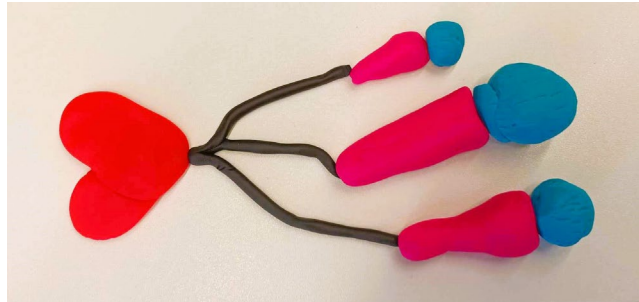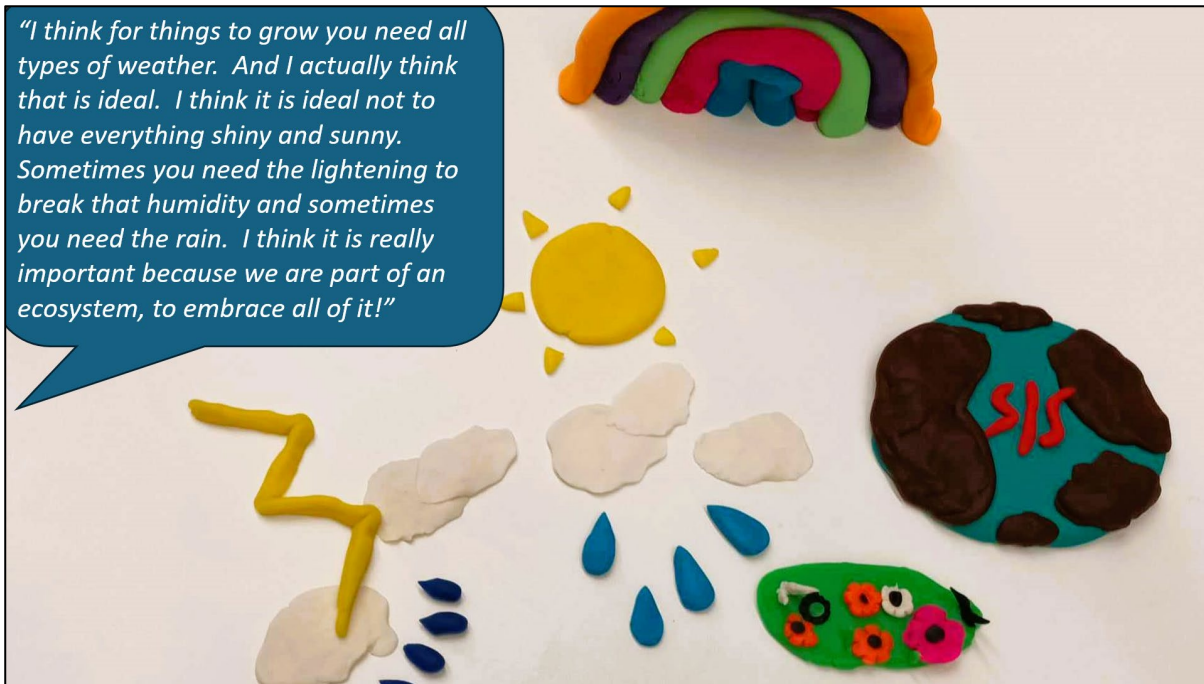

This inspired further reflections from the Student Partners about the challenges of working in a role with blurred parameters:

> Knowing your place is a challenge as different projects require different roles. For example, running focus groups puts you in a position of authority/responsibility as the person running the session but taking part in a focus group, the role is switched.

> The difficulty is knowing where your role ends and others begin. Sometimes you are treated as a staff member and this is difficult because I am not fully. Sometimes you are in student teams and treated with high quality, working with transferrable skills which some others do not have, which is fine.

When tasked with the group activity, the Student Partners worked together to co-create a model of 'changing weather conditions' to represent their vision of the ideal student/staff partnership. This demonstrates their willingness to embody the challenges of the third space.

"I think for things to grow you need all types of weather. And I actually think that is ideal. I think it is ideal not to have everything shiny and sunny. Sometimes you need the lightening to break that humidity and sometimes you need the rain. I think it is really important because we are part of an ecosystem, to embrace all of it!"

Student Partners especially appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their role and experiences in collaboration with each other:

> I enjoyed the interactive nature of the workshop and the ability to talk to my colleagues and reflect on our different experiences.

> It [the workshop] shows that I am not alone. Other Student Partners in the team are going through different things in different ways but eventually all are on the same path.

Moulding third-space partnerships: our conclusions

When students move into third-space partnerships, they join a messy space. Yet this messiness often goes unspoken in higher education, with its tendency to focus on partnership outcomes rather than the process of working. Paying greater attention to the deeply felt experiences of Student Partners gives voice to the emotional labour of third-space work (Hermsen et al., 2017). This not only creates new knowledge on the topic, but also helps Student Partners feel more valued, supported, and heard. Introducing students to the theoretical concept of 'third space' supports them to better articulate their contradictory experiences and identities as third-space partners. This newfound reflexivity can empower them to manage the hybridity of the roles with greater assurance and positivity than they might do otherwise. Indeed, we have found that creating a safe

'harbour' for Student Partners to dock in and reflexively explore third-space troubles (and triumphs), helps them become more comfortable with, and positively embrace, the contradictions and dilemmas within their hybrid role. Our Student Partners left our workshop able to describe the potentially creative aspects of working in the third space and the advantageous position it gives them within higher education (Abegglan, Burns and Sinfield, 2023).

Hopes and dreams of partnership working: A Play-Doh model
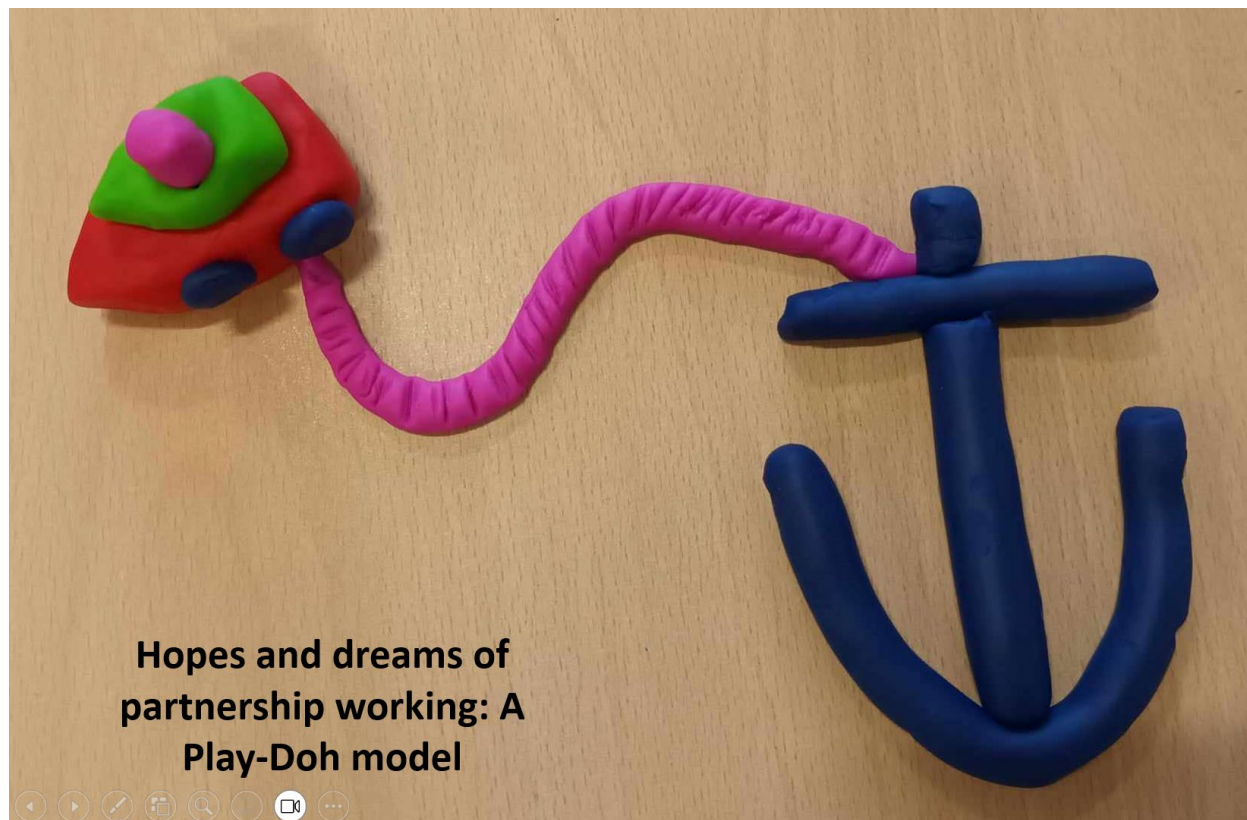
Our case study demonstrates the value of moulding third-space partnerships. Through play, our Student Partners have been able to 'increase their sense of self-awareness and self-expression, culture of appreciation and community, and develop problem solving skills by looking at things from different perspectives' (Dominey, 2021, p.52). We found Play-Doh to be an especially useful method for helping our students express the not-easily expressible about their third-space experiences and identities. This is because the process of making helped them connect with tacit parts of their self and reimagine themselves in new ways (Stead, 2019). For this reason, participation in creative activities can be transformative. The malleability of the material means that Play-Doh is especially useful for moulding fluid third spaces and loosely bounded roles. Whilst not all identities in, and experiences of, third spaces are the same, 'through imagination and creativity, one can

transcend the boundaries of differences' (Dominey, 2021, p.49). As Nerantzi (2019) argues, when cross-boundary groups use play, it strengthens collaboration and collective discovery. Going forward, we will continue with the 'All Work and No Play?' workshop series to navigate the boundaries of third-space partnerships across Southampton Solent University. We will also explore how Play-Doh can be used most effectively to facilitate shared understanding between staff and students on the process of working together. When used collaboratively, playful methods can help break down traditional hierarchies and empower individuals to co-create meaning, giving collective ownership of the knowledge produced. It is these compassionate connections that are at the heart of our ambitions for third-space partnership working.

**Hopes and dreams of partnership working:
A Play-Doh model**

Acknowledgements

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