



The third space professional: cultivating authentic learning experiences through collaborative practice

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Abstract

We are witnessing a rise in collaboration between academics and third space professionals, which has resulted in a curriculum design that is far more focused on cultivating new authentic learning experiences and assessment opportunities for students in higher education. This collective approach to teaching and learning not only provides students with real-world experiences but also facilitates the development of student achievement across the designated learning outcomes as defined by Higher Education Institutions (HEI). In this opinion piece, I share my experience as a liaison librarian who is actively working as a third space professional across the subjects of Law, Sociology, Social Policy, and Criminology. Discussion is considered as a vital way for third space professionals to gain trust and credibility amongst academics, as well as the positive impact the introduction of hybrid working had in strengthening these alliances. Collaborative practice is explored in terms of how this can influence the design of authentic learning experiences and encourage innovative ways of assessing students. Research-connected teaching is viewed as a way for the third space professional to scaffold student learning and to develop an academic skills support offer that is robust and experiential.

Keywords: third space; third space professional; liaison librarian; student learning; collaboration; collaborative practice; curriculum design; authentic learning; authentic assessment; academic skills; experiential learning; hybrid working; real-world experiences; learning outcomes; educational development; knowledge exchange; research-connected teaching.

Introduction

Whether it be through the world of hybrid-learning or the ever-changing landscape of generative artificial intelligence, we are witnessing a transformation across higher education. It is surely inevitable then that the rise of the ‘third space’ professional (Whitchurch, 2012) would assume greater significance amongst academic colleagues. This new way of working enables further professional guidance for students and establishes a new space where academic and professional staff can work collaboratively to deliver a holistic approach to teaching and learning. Developments such as this one have been coined the ‘third space’ by those in the sector, and the topic has been studied in depth by Celia Whitchurch who describes this movement as ‘increased fluidity between academic and associated activities for example, educational development, knowledge exchange and public engagement’ (Whitchurch, 2022).

As a liaison librarian who is working as a third space professional, I understand the importance of academics working in partnership with library services. There are various reasons why students might not seek help if they are struggling with particular aspects of their course. Students who are particularly anxious may be less likely to ask for advice or guidance, and other students may find it difficult to determine the areas where they are struggling and need support. To remove these barriers to learning, students should be explicitly prepared for assessments and tasks within their taught curriculum (Hughes et al., 2022). This teaching model not only creates an environment where students are encouraged to be more curious, confident, and better at problem-solving, but also enhances learning outcomes and student satisfaction overall.

This opinion piece will explore how active discussion amongst myself and academics enables this collaborative practice to occur and guarantees that the academic skills sessions I provide as a liaison librarian are curriculum-embedded. I will also explore how a collaborative approach to teaching can initiate liaison librarian involvement in the design of authentic learning experiences, assessments, and research-connected teaching to further support student learning.

Discussion as a means for collaborative practice

Discussion is of great importance when seeking to work collaboratively and is a vital way for the third space professional to explore the broader concept of education and the various roles that can be occupied. It is of no surprise then, that the cataclysmic shift to hybrid working caused something of a dichotomy for third space professionals accustomed to these discussions taking place in person.

During this time, I was employed in another third space professional role within the Careers and Employability team at the university. This role heavily relied on thorough discussion and collaboration between me and academics so as to effectively design curriculum-embedded teaching activities. In order to do this, I soon had to adapt to the new, virtual spaces where discussion and collaborative practice could occur, and it was when navigating these spaces that I became particularly intrigued by the opportunities that would arise for the third space professional.

The lines of distinction between different occupations and roles became blurred at times, but through discussion I was able to identify new and innovative ways to communicate ideas. Whether through virtual coffee mornings, quizzes, or after work get togethers, one might say a virtual 'third space' arose where professional and academic staff navigated asynchronous learning and shared vital knowledge exchange. These virtual discussions provided a place of sanctuary where colleagues were able to learn collectively, support each other, and share innovative ideas that would add value to the student learning experience.

Fast forward and the sector had developed into a 'new normal' where colleagues were not only able to meet in person, but also able to meet online (hybrid working at its best). At this point, I was now employed as a liaison librarian within the university. A core responsibility of this role is to work in partnership with academic colleagues to deliver curriculum-embedded academic skills sessions that will facilitate student achievement across the designated learning outcomes. To ensure professional partnerships were established, I suggested meeting academics in coffee-shops, rather than the stale meeting rooms that we would have previously used. In these new spaces, I used discussion to place emphasis on our shared values and objectives, rather than the individual roles we occupied on a vocational level. It was here, through fostering a collective approach to teaching, that I was

able to explore the potential of the third space professional, and the value that could be added to the student experience.

Grenny (2017) highlights the importance of discussion amongst colleagues and how it enables us to share concrete examples and helps to remind us of what we should be doing and why we should be doing it. Collaboration across multiple academic disciplines is also becoming increasingly prevalent, evidenced through spaces at the University of Liverpool such as the [Digital Innovation Facility \(DIF\)](#) (University of Liverpool, 2024a) and the [MIT Media Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) (MIT Media Lab, 2024). Of course, we all understand that the more we discuss and collaborate with our academic colleagues, the more trust and credibility will be instilled throughout our professional relationships. An in-depth understanding of pedagogic approaches is required, but it is integral to consider the diverse learning needs of students and the equality of opportunity for learners. It is these shared values that need to be at the forefront of any discussions so as to influence both the liaison librarian and academic to work collaboratively.

Developing authentic learning experiences through collaborative practice

With regard to developing student academic skills, for the liaison librarian it is through collaborative practice that authentic learning experiences and research-connected teaching can be established. Following on from teaching sessions, anonymous surveys completed by students show the positive impact this teaching model can have on student knowledge and skills acquisition, identifying that it has further supported their learning. More recently, this positive feedback has also led to me designing a potential authentic assessment with an academic. The authentic assessment will ask students to evidence their academic and information literacy skills, as well as the methods they have used to gather relevant information for a client. It draws upon practical research and digital fluency skills through enabling students to effectively navigate resources and find relevant information. It moves away from an assessment that is simply trying to retrieve information from students and focuses much more on self-directed learning, encouraging the learner to think critically and independently.

The student is at the centre of a vital decision-making process, and it therefore becomes much more client-centred, providing the students with the control to understand their capabilities. It is also an excellent way for students to evidence their learning and

understanding. The decision-making is shifted away from the teacher and over to the learner, an approach considered by Biggs and Tang (2011). It also addresses the dichotomy of generative artificial intelligence by beginning to steer away from some of the issues that might arise when asking students to complete a simple essay. The major learning outcomes of the assessment will be centred on practical research skills, digital fluency, and legal knowledge. Practical research skills will be evidenced through their ability to break down information and use appropriate methods to retrieve relevant results for clients. Digital fluency will be evidenced through their ability to navigate key resources and databases to find relevant information. Legal knowledge will be evidenced through their ability to resolve client's issues through the use of relevant legal materials, and their ability to interpret information and construct relevant knowledge for their client.

Some might say that an assessment of this nature is traversing into the world of the third space itself.... Not only does collaborative work such as this give credibility to the liaison librarian, but it enables a broader understanding of the contribution that specific departments can make to the learning process. The more the third space professional demonstrates how they can add value to the student learning process, the more embedded the third space professional will become in delivering a coherent and holistic learning experience.

The third space professional and research-connected teaching

A research-connected approach to teaching blends together academic skills and professional practice to connect students to real-world experiences, a key objective of the [University of Liverpool's strategy for Education and student experience](#) (University of Liverpool, 2024b). By adopting a research-connected approach to teaching, I am able to engage students with an experiential teaching model that encourages them to question and problem solve. It could also be said that by supporting academics with research-connected teaching, third space professionals are helping to minimise workloads and are providing colleagues with the time to be more efficient and effective within their day-to-day practice.

Participating in research-connected teaching as a third space professional also establishes a platform to share invaluable input where originally there would have been a 'bolted-on'

session which students often see as less relevant. I am able to bridge the gap between academic and professional practice, whilst encouraging students to actively engage with academic skills support, not only from the roots of their academic discipline, but to understand how these skills directly translate into the practical skills needed for professional practice. Embedding skills content in modules, alongside disciplinary knowledge, also removes barriers to learning for students who are the least likely to engage with additional content or activity. It is therefore vital that third space professionals continue to work in collaboration with academics to deliver research-connected teaching.

Academic skills support and research-connected teaching

So as to place further emphasis on the importance of academic skills development, I encourage students to work through hypothetical scenarios that they may be faced with in professional practice. This teaching model can also help to scaffold student learning, an approach explored by the University of San Diego where they have found that delivering lessons in distinct segments provides educators with the space to provide less support as students master new concepts or materials. Students are responsible for navigating their own way through course content and have more time to concentrate on the skills they are acquiring (University of San Diego, n.d.).

More recently, I was asked to design a writing workshop for a group of Sociology students, which I divided into three learning activities: acquiring knowledge and information, a group task, and feedback. The group task was very much centred on experiential learning, as students were asked to carry out an analysis of an organisational policy and then asked to draft a critical response outlining recommendations for improvements. Concepts of Knowles' Andragogy – Adult Learning Theory (Learning Theories, 2017) were also adopted here. This theory emphasises that adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life. The group task asked students to draw upon self-directedness and use past experiences to construct and apply their learning. For this particular module, students will have engaged in either an applied social research project or a work project in collaboration with a local voluntary community organisation (VCO), and so it made sense to ask students to critically assess the policies whilst reflecting on their own professional experiences. Bloom's Learning Taxonomy (Armstrong, 2010) can also be considered as a component of this particular model of teaching as students were asked to evaluate, synthesise, analyse, apply,

understand, and present the knowledge they had acquired through feeding back to their peers at the end of the session. Following on from the session, feedback was positive. One student said: 'I will examine my writing more and I now understand how to be more critical'. This teaching model can also be closely associated to 'deep' and 'surface' learning as it provides a platform for students to delve deeper into their learning, as discussed by Biggs and Tang (2011).

Patton and McMahon's Systems Theory Framework (Marcr, 2019) might also be explored with regard to the third space professional and a research-connected approach to teaching. The Systems Theory Framework is very much a career development theory, but in a wider sense it argues that education institutions 'will have intrinsic structures of influence themselves and will communicate these in the broadest sense to the individual, influencing their thinking and narrative' (Marcr, 2019). When thinking about the third space more critically, the third space professional is seeking to break down the boundaries of the single occupations which surround an individual. What was once the sole jurisdiction of a particular profession is now shifting towards a more collective approach to student learning, and therefore, one that can be far more reactive in how it respects individual learners and diverse learning communities.

Similarly, as a third space professional who is supporting students with their academic skills development, I find it important to incorporate Systems Theory Framework into my teaching practice, as when students consider this theory within the context of their academic journey, it can elicit a more reactive response. For example, when discussing the topic of referencing with students, it is important to discuss this in relation to the wider impact it has on academic practice, both for the individual and across the institution. This provides the student with context in relation to their learning and establishes a platform for them to begin to develop their skills further. This is also another way to enable students to understand that what is important and meaningful to them can impact their learning and academic development in a positive way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, active discussion with academic colleagues places greater significance on the credibility of the third space professional and, in this case, the liaison librarian. This

leads to the third space professional being invited to participate in key discussions surrounding learning and educational development across the wider HE sector. During these discussions, the third space professional is able to demonstrate how they can add value to day-to-day academic practices and the educational experiences of students, and is able to place emphasis on the boundless opportunities that can arise from sharing these new perspectives.

Collaborative practice with academics is therefore essential and provides a vital space for liaison librarians to demonstrate where they can add value with regard to teaching design and delivery. It also establishes a teaching practice that is focused on creating educational content and tailored resources that further support the key objectives of the institution's curriculum design framework.

Additionally, it is clear that allowing the third space professional to engage in the design of research-connected teaching can lead to unexpected outcomes. These outcomes could be the exploration of new assessment methods or the development of innovative activities that significantly enhance the learning process and facilitate student achievement across the designated learning outcomes. This collaborative approach to teaching results in a comprehensive learning experience that engages every student and further supports academic skills development.

As the third space professional continues to traverse their academic surroundings, it will be interesting to observe how this shift in practice further impacts student learning needs and the design of authentic learning experiences, as well as how it will affect the broader educational strategies and curriculum frameworks within our Higher Education Institutions.

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