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Being and becoming third-space professionals: a case study from low-and-middle income countries

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Abstract

This case study explores the authors' experiences of establishing the identity of third-space professionals at a multi-country university with campuses on three continents. In particular, it draws on their identities and experiences as female leaders in educational development. Using autoethnography, the authors reflect on their experiences to identify issues, strategies, and areas for further development regarding third-space professionals' identities, particularly with regard to women. As the concept of third-space professionals is relatively new in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) where the university is located, this journey of becoming and being third-space professionals was fraught with challenges that question traditional norms within academia and their culture, requiring innovative problem-solving, continuous learning and accountability. Establishing this new identity involved extensive negotiations to create a new professional stream, gaining recognition from university leaders, and advocating for career pathways. Recognising the demands on third-space women leaders in our contexts, the case study also underscores the importance of workplace structures that support those who work in this critical area. The insights gained may be helpful to others seeking to establish third-space professionals in their professional contexts.

Keywords: third-space professionals; low- and middle-income countries; leadership; autoethnography; COVID-19; women.

Introduction

There is growing evidence indicating an increased convergence between academic and support roles in higher education, such as those of faculty developers, education designers, and educational technologists. This phenomenon, termed the 'third space' (Whitchurch, 2012), has signalled a departure from traditional boundaries between academic and support roles within university settings. Faculty developers, educational technologists, and learning designers exist in this third space which is removed from the binary spaces of academia and support functions, but remains closely related to them (Qin et al., 2023). In this third space, thus, existing knowledge can be enriched, and there is a greater probability of knowledge creation (Qin et al., 2023). This is reflective of the work third-space individuals undertake to enhance pedagogy and student learning experiences (Browne and Beetham, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2017). In their supportive capacity, they engage in curriculum and course design, pedagogical enhancement, and faculty development and serve as project managers and liaisons for blended, online, and digital learning initiatives. They introduce new pedagogical approaches and technologies and design digital teaching and learning environments. Recently, e-learning designers have assumed roles as supporters, change agents, catalysts, and providers of expertise in higher education (Obexer and Giardina, 2016), offering strategic guidance and contributing to policy development.

Challenges of third space

The need for professionals who support faculty development expanded during COVID-19 as education was disrupted due to the restrictions on in-person teaching at academic institutions (Hains-Wesson and Rahman, 2023). Faculty workload increased as faculty shifted courses online and taught using digital tools amidst other pressures of working from home. The pandemic also exacerbated pre-existing inequities among faculty regarding gender, resources and race (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Ribarovska et al., 2021). Thus, institutions turned to e-learning specialists, instructional designers and education developers to offer faculty development and teaching support that would help rapidly transition to online teaching to keep their programmes afloat and maintain student learning

in some shape and form (Salajegheh et al., 2022; Soklaridis et al., 2022). However, despite the rising demand for their services, third-space individuals continue to struggle to find their identity, which remains ambiguous in their institutions, as they do not completely occupy either academic or administrative positions (Obexer, 2022). This is further exacerbated when they are women, thus 'double-minoritised' (Li et al, 2022, p.891) working in predominantly male-dominated higher education contexts (Zurhellen and Karaus, 2023) in a field that represents a minority in universities and institutions. Therefore, they are often made to feel isolated and marginalised by their faculty peers because the latter also do not understand or recognise the grey area of the third space (Whitchurch, 2010).

Another challenge is the need for defined career trajectories and progression ladders at institutions (Moran and Misra, 2018), forcing them to float between the academic and administrative streams, thereby not advancing successfully or fairly in their institutional hierarchies (Obexer, 2022). While their work challenges them to play innovative support roles and fulfil new needs, they are forced to exist within the traditional structures and roles of the university that do not seem to be changing (Behari-Leak and le Roux, 2018). Third-space individuals also often work across different departments, having their own norms and work ethic (Veles et al., 2019), which adds to the feeling of not belonging to one team and identity confusion. This fluidity also results in dotted reporting lines to managers who struggle to fully comprehend their roles and not view them as disruptors or side support (Smith et al., 2021). While research shows how critical faculty development in teaching is for improving student success (Civitas Learning, 2023), faculty developers are still not valued or recognised for the efforts they put into teaching and learning, and their work is sidelined. There are also concerns that institutional leadership often does not consult them in strategic decision-making and/or goal setting (Obexer, 2022; Hains-Wesson and Rahman, 2023).

Despite the above, the third-space professions are rapidly growing into a creative, innovative and productive space (Behari-Leak and le Roux, 2018) with self-motivated professionals who enjoy new challenges and creative work (Obexer, 2022). To continue supporting them, institutions need to revisit their organisational structures, recognise the value these individuals bring to teaching and learning and reward them by legitimising their roles (Whitchurch, 2008; Smith et al., 2021).

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While research has recently focused on the concept of third-space professionals in the Global North, less is known about its evolution in Low- and Middle-Income countries (LMICs). This case study examines the authors' journeys of establishing their identities as third-space professionals within a multi-campus university across Pakistan, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. The case study begins with background information about the unit, followed by three vignettes that outline the issues and strategies to address those issues. We then present the analysis, identifying the core issues surrounding the identity of such professionals and the key factors that facilitate and hinder this process in our context. We conclude with a broader discussion of the findings. Although situated in South Asia and East Africa, the issues discussed will resonate with global higher education professionals and policymakers.

Context

The university the authors belong to (the university) is a private not-for-profit institution with several campuses in Pakistan, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. In 2013, an integrated academic development and quality assurance unit (the network) was established to address the concerns regarding teaching quality within the university. The network concentrated on three interconnected areas: 1) using digital technologies to enhance teaching and learning, 2) enhancing teaching and learning practices, and 3) strengthening quality assurance systems. The network focused on addressing faculty development needs identified through a consultative process of needs assessments. This approach helped ensure that all students have engaging learning experiences to achieve the desired graduate attributes. The development of this innovative concept gave rise to new career pathways and raised numerous challenges that had to be addressed along the way.

Methodology

The authors, women leaders in the network, adopted an autoethnographic approach to describe and analyse crucial issues, aiming to reflect on our journey in establishing the identity of third-space professionals in LMICs. This methodology enables us to concentrate on generating insightful observations rooted in our personal encounters and struggles, inviting readers to co-construct meaning and explore their interpretations within their

context (Richards, 2008). Our approach acknowledges subjectivity in data interpretation (Holt, 2003). Three authors have led the unit's establishment since its inception, while one author joined the team at a critical juncture where creating physical space was an essential part of the team's professional identity. We share three reflective vignette narratives highlighting our involvement in shaping the identity of third-space professionals at the university. Subsequently, we analyse these to discern common themes linking our autobiographical narrative with the broader issues of higher education in LMICs. Three authors individually wrote the vignettes reflecting on specific aspects of our journey. We then analysed these narratives to identify key themes, which helped in making sense of our experiences.

Vignettes

A dual dilemma: the need for and ability to access and retain third-space individuals
In the countries where the university operates, academic development support in higher education is a new concept, and no formal programmes exist to train third-space individuals. Therefore, the network had to 'grow its own' educational developers, instructional designers, and e-learning specialists. This was against the backdrop of an academic community, which, a decade ago, doubted the value of support for teaching and digital learning, causing cynicism and resistance. To mitigate this, we used a multi-pronged approach to build expertise, support educational development, and establish our work's legitimacy:

- Focusing on recruiting for potential rather than expertise by identifying individuals with teaching or education-related backgrounds and, ideally, some expertise in technology integration.
- Identifying mentors known to have expertise and success in the field from institutions mainly in North America and higher education volunteers to work with potential third-space individuals at the university and build their capacity through training, shadowing, co-planning and co-facilitating.
- Establishing reward and recognition structures to professionalise third-space individuals through internationally benchmarked programmes such as gaining recognition through Fellowships by Advance HE. Today, 93 Higher Education

Academy (HEA) fellows exist at the university, of which 17% (n=16) are third-space professionals.

- Enabling academic joint appointments to create a standing amongst faculty of the expertise of third-space leadership.
- Providing faculty members who have demonstrated good teaching practices with opportunities to engage in educational development activities, thereby cultivating a growing and sustainable pool of third-space expertise within the university. This includes co-facilitating faculty development workshops, engaging in the fellowship scheme, and becoming a member of the Teachers Academy.

Whilst faculty have embraced the network as a safe space where they feel they belong, are not judged, and can engage with and learn from colleagues from other disciplines, third-space individuals are restless in this space. They feel that current structures do not provide the flexibility to acknowledge their skill sets or academic contributions. Over the last decade, the high demand for such third-space individuals, further highlighted globally during the recent COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in serious brain-drain issues, with young professionals opting for lucrative opportunities in educational institutions in the Global North. This leaves us with having to start from scratch and train the next batch of third-space academic support experts as we educate administrative departments, such as finance and human resources, on the need to value, reward and recognise this rare talent in our field in LMICs.

Meeting the expanded digital learning needs of the academy

Educational technologists and e-learning designers (n=4) who are part of the network support the faculty to develop blended courses and assist them in incorporating digital tools into their teaching across all modalities (Naseem et al., 2023). While they were doing this when online and blended learning was a matter of choice, following COVID-19, the demand for technology integration surged, putting pressure on the few members who were experts in e-learning support. Hiring new members was impossible because of budget constraints and the difficulty of finding staff with expertise to support digital learning needs.

Therefore, we adopted a virtual cross-functional team approach (Obiano, 2021). Each programme or department leader appointed a staff member as a champion, empowering them to take on additional support roles within their areas. We provided training in using

the university's learning management system and established a virtual network using platforms like WhatsApp and Zoom for regular communication and collaboration. Simultaneously, the network introduced new pedagogies and technologies and focused on creating team cohesion and trust during the sessions through team-building activities and icebreakers. Virtual members were also invited to co-facilitate workshops and other faculty support activities, allowing them to showcase their expertise, interact with staff from different units and enhance their self-confidence. Regular and timely communication, coordinating schedules and priorities across various functional areas, and building trust and relationships within the cross-functional teams have helped. The team developed the university's first-ever digital learning strategy and has collaborated with international and regional professional organisations to expand the impact. A self-learning manual (Pitts and Naseem, 2021) was developed to help faculty members design effective online and blended learning experiences. On-going classroom-based support is available and appreciated by faculty members who are keen to explore digital pedagogies. At present, support for the use of generative AI is also included as a part of the services offered by the team. An Education Development Synergy Collective has recently been established, comprising heads of teams who provide academic development support within the university, to advocate for third-space professionals. This collaborative approach has allowed us to meet the institutional needs, expand our impact and create more ownership and innovation in technology integration without adding more employees to the organisation.

From virtual to physical space: a step towards identity negotiation
The network operated without designated workspaces for eight years, often using temporary arrangements across various buildings. This lack of a dedicated physical space hindered activities due to the unavailability of appropriate spaces and the network's recognition, which contributed to low morale among under-recognised and underpaid members. An external review (Dawson et al., 2019) also highlighted the need for an active learning space conducive to network and faculty collaboration, peer-led teaching, and pedagogical experimentation (Cruz, 2021).

Post-COVID-19, there emerged a recognition of the role played by the network and that collaboration between faculty, third-space professionals and students was critical for effective teaching and learning. Thus, the leadership approved a proposal for the first

Teaching and Learning Commons (TLC) on its Pakistan campus. This space would role model professional learning spaces incorporating design features that supported learning and facilitating evidence-based teaching and learning practices (Rook et al., 2015) and the latest technology to support hybrid and online course design and teaching (American Council on Education [ACE] and Pod Network, 2018).

The negotiations for TLC underscored the team's identity as third-space individuals by empowering them to bargain, negotiate and advocate (Li et al, 2022) for their space. This comprised discussions ranging from negotiating with deans for a space close to faculty and students, to helping the design department understand the network's work. It also included explaining why new types of spaces were needed; from collaborative spaces for peer-learning and micro-teaching environments to spaces for experimenting with technology and smaller closed spaces for consultations. A strategic decision was made to house the team supporting the development of digital media content in the TLC so the space could become a one-stop shop for faculty development and teaching support along with other scholarly activities involving extensive use of digital media in teaching, learning and research activities (ACE and Pod Network, 2018).

Today, one year since the establishment of the TLC, we have seen extensive use of the space by faculty and students. The network and digital media teams sharing the space work hard to lead collaborative workshops and enrich faculty support. With this space and its use, a sense of identity is emerging, with faculty often dropping by for consultations and discussions or some quiet time to plan their teaching. Perhaps the most significant indicator of success has been the announcement of plans by the university leadership to create similar spaces on other campuses.

Analysis and discussion

The vignettes above clearly illustrate that third-space professionals operate at the intersection of academia, technology, and pedagogy, bridging the gap between traditional academic roles and technological educational advancements. They highlight challenges and positive contributions to our journey of defining the identity of third-space professionals in LMICs. The critical roles we and our colleagues have played in enhancing teaching quality at the university were initially overlooked or misunderstood within

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traditional academic structures due to various limitations identified in the vignettes. Over time, it became evident that in countries where these professions did not yet exist, we were trailblazers, effectively creating new professions within our countries. In our case, creating the new professional identity involved seeking recognition from senior academic leaders for the expertise, skills, and perspectives that third-space professionals contribute to the university setting, gaining professional acceptance and establishing a clear career pathway. Being supported to build a dedicated physical space also speaks to the leadership's understanding of the need to emphasise our professional identity and highlights our work's significance and potential. Capacity building through remote mentoring and recognition through professional fellowships has also been instrumental in equipping third-space professionals with the necessary competencies and confidence to perform their work effectively. Implementing a virtual and distributed work strategy has provided staff with non-traditional professional growth experiences as have the opportunities to network with similar professionals from the region. Furthermore, collaborative work within the university has also helped establish our identity as faculty members now advocate for and bring credibility to the third space by collaborating in research partnerships and even co-developing courses with our team. Whitchurch (2008, p.394) refers to this phenomenon as third-space individuals who 'build their credibility on a personal basis, via lateral relationships'.

The ambiguity surrounding the roles of third-space professionals, especially those related to technology integration leads to confusion in professional identity and may undermine motivation among professionals (Bird, 2004; Browne and Beetham, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2017). Moreover, compared to faculty members who receive recognition and promotion for their work and IT professionals who move up the career ladder into management roles, third-space professionals face the absence of clear career paths and remain under-compensated. This lack of explicit recognition and advancement opportunities can lead to frustration and attrition within the field (Shurville et al., 2009). The vignettes illustrate that one of the factors in guiding identity development involved recognising the global context of brain-drain and migration of skilled labour, and the factors influencing the growth of these professions in our countries. Because of a limited local talent pool, attracting and retaining educational technologists, faculty developers, and e-learning designers is challenging to begin with, but even more pronounced recently because of increased opportunities for these individuals to work remotely for universities in high-income countries. These positions typically offer higher compensation, better professional

development opportunities, and exposure to innovative practices. To counter these, LMIC universities need new job structures and investments in capacity building through partnerships with other regional and global universities and professional organisations.

Developing this identity required substantial effort from network leaders, who were mainly women. Being a women-led unit has both enabled and hindered acceptance of our network. Collaborating with faculty requires us to draw upon perceived feminine attributes like being supportive, persuasive, and creative (Gallant, 2013). Also, our cultural context has generally accepted our role because teaching is seen as a women's profession and women are often not seen as threatening (Ashraf, 2013). However, seeking recognition and awards challenges this norm and also highlights the issue of the undervaluing of teaching itself. As newly established third-space professionals in our contexts, we often spend long hours at work, raising concerns within our families due to our additional roles at home and in society. These long hours may discourage other women from joining this field. Recognising how demanding these roles are for women in our contexts, workplace structures that support women working in this area are critical to ensure the retention and growth of third-space professionals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the journey of building the identity of third-space professionals in LMICs has been marked by challenges and positive strides. The vignettes shed light on various factors shaping this process, highlighting their critical role in advancing teaching quality. Considering the brain-drain issue, it is critical for universities in LMICs to reassess their structures, rewards, and support mechanisms in light of the global market rather than focusing on the local market. Unfortunately, this crucial conversation has not yet begun within the local senior higher education leadership circles, resulting in universities losing experts and facing difficulty finding replacements. This situation underscores the need for a clear shift in thinking. Addressing these challenges requires a system-wide approach involving higher education commissions, professional organisations and universities, prioritising investments in capacity building, infrastructure, and supportive policies and structures to nurture and retain third-space professionals, who are primarily women, within LMICs, thereby contributing to advancing education and development in these regions.

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