



Pernicious ignorance and the marginalisation of third space professionals: reflections on lived experience

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Abstract

This article is part reflection and part case study based upon my work as a third space worker (Whitchurch, 2023a) since at least 2010. I will surface a recurring challenge encompassing the recognition and visibility of third space professionals in higher education as *educators* who experience silencing stemming from pernicious ignorance. Accordingly, I use Dotson's notion of pernicious ignorance (2011, p.238) to analyse a reflective vignette to illustrate a challenge that undermines third space practitioners. The aim is to equip readers with theory that they can use to counter negative workplace behaviours, whether observed, experienced, or both, while strengthening their positions as third space professionals.

Keywords: epistemic violence; testimonial quieting; silencing; third space identity.

Introduction and background

Disrupting silos while embracing collaboration can effect positive change in universities and the communities they serve (Hunt, 2017; AlWaer, 2020; Lodge, 2023). Indeed, some universities champion collaboration to build and enhance community while improving what we do for all (University of Glasgow, n.d.). Advance HE (2023) has recently added a fifth value, V5 'collaborate with others to enhance practice', to the UK Professional Standards Framework. I welcome this addition from a professional perspective as it might encourage third space professionals, as educators, to think critically about how/why they collaborate with others to enhance learning, teaching and/or assessment practices while fostering further collaboration.

Despite such policies, there are a few challenges that third space professionals face in practice. These relate to how power imbalances and hierarchies thwart collaboration and deeper change by upholding traditional systems and structures. This is fostered by harmful competition among colleagues and superficial lip service paid to university strategies, systems and structures in which third space professionals often play a key role.

Positionality

I write this piece using critical and decolonial lenses. In brief, the underpinning lenses that I employ help to identify and interrogate elements of bell hooks's notion of the 'imperialist white supremacist heteropatriarchy' enacted in systems and structures. Combining the critical lens with the decolonial lens helps to surface how the (Eurocentric) overrepresentation creates universalising ways of knowing/being/living. These are underpinned by hierarchies and binaries (Quijano, 2000; Wynter, 2003) within the context of education, that privilege those in power while creating environments stifling collaboration and collective action in the name of neoliberal accountability and efficiency (Brown, 2015). The aim, then, is to create a more equitable education that rejects coloniality's harmful practices while embracing inclusive, empathic approaches where more profound listening is vital and acknowledgement, among others, are essential, as these can enable critical interrogation of issues while (re)imagining possible solutions.

My positionality frames this case study while demonstrating identity fluidity, one that 'is complex, changes in different contexts and geographies, and is constantly evolving' (Call-Cummings et al, 2024, p.3). I write as an educator with broad, complementary experiences: I am a mixed-ethnicity, white-passing, neurodiverse dual-national migrant who has lived, studied, and worked in different countries, and so I draw on a rich tapestry of experiences gained in the United States, the former Soviet Union, and China. I have had some good teachers over the years and wish to emulate their passion, care and kindness for developing others. Their inspiration, encouragement from critical friends and my attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) superpower have all played a role in becoming an educator. I have regularly collaborated with various administrative, academic, teaching and research staff to create courses for students (and soon, hopefully, with students). To do this well, I consult academic literature and professional networks to ensure what I do is underpinned by theory, good practices and practical wisdom, as well

as values that chime with my own. My passion for sharing and fostering other ways of learning, along with the encouragement of critical friends, has encouraged me to share these at internal and external events on topics as wide-ranging as: English for academic purposes and learning development; good practices for digital education and the applications of podcasting for education; the intersections of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and race and, most recently, decolonial thinking. In addition, I am a doctoral student of Education; I can explain decolonial thinking and aim to apply it within my doctoral research.

These experiences inform my third space identity and positionality while underscoring my passion for education. Equally, they evidence multiple and intersecting layers of my personal and professional identity and, thus, a positionality that allows me to critically reflect and comment on my experiences as a third space worker to make sense of these.

Dotson's concept of pernicious ignorance

Growing research in higher education evidences the impacts of harmful silencing sustained by Eurocentric hierarchies (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Hutton and Cappellini, 2022; Wong, 2022). Providing a theory through which to view experiences can help third space staff to understand what they are going through and, perhaps, why, while providing some tools for countering such behaviours whether these are observed, experienced, or both. In addition, the notion of whose knowledge counts within academia presents dilemmas that might resonate with third space professionals. Critical practitioners from bell hooks (1994, 2003, 2009, 2010) and Paulo Freire (2000) to decolonial thinkers such as Sylvia Wynter (2003), Antonio Quijano (2000, 2007), and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) address this question which is inextricably bound up in coloniality and power, and which affects how education is done and whose knowledge counts. To this end, the key argument and provocation that I contend with are that third space professionals regularly experience pernicious ignorance by being silenced, which is a form of epistemic violence. First, I explain silencing, pernicious ignorance and epistemic violence to foreground my subsequent analyses.

Dotson (2011) outlines two silencing practices: testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering. While I focus on testimonial quieting in this paper, third space professionals

regularly enact testimonial smothering to protect themselves and others (see also Dotson, 2011; Viaene et al., 2023). Testimonial quieting encompasses instances where the audience disregards the speaker as a knower despite evidence otherwise (Dotson, 2011, p.242). This parallels testimonial injustice and how it is enacted by power, thus directly affecting one's identity as a means of control (Fricker, 2007).

Pernicious ignorance is often bound up in power relations. It can be linked to characteristics (or an intersection thereof) of the silenced colleague that the interlocutor knowingly or unknowingly uses to discredit the knowledge of the colleague (Dotson, 2011; Collins, 2019, 2022) which can present material harms to their identity, health and career (Wong, 2022). Specifically, where an interlocutor disregards (silences) a colleague despite evidence demonstrating that the colleague is knowledgeable, harm is caused owing to what Dotson (2011) terms pernicious ignorance. Thus, this links back to how Eurocentric systems and structures enable and sustain such harm by privileging those in power while thwarting possibilities for collaboration, for collaboration requires listening rather than silencing.

Dotson (2011, p.238) extends silencing due to pernicious ignorance from the notion of epistemic violence from Spivak (1998, pp.282-83 cited in Dotson 2011, p.263) by linking successful communication with being heard and reciprocity thereof. Epistemic violence occurs when an interlocutor refuses to acknowledge a speaker as a knower, specifically, it 'is a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance' (Dotson, 2011, p.238). Put another way, as Fricker (2007, p.14) argues, where one's status and identity are at odds with the dominant paradigm that bell hooks describes as the 'imperialist white supremacist heteropatriarchy'. Those in power will knowingly and unknowingly silence anyone classed as Other unless they are critically conscious of inequalities and power relations. Women, people of colour and all marginalised groups (for example, neurodivergent, LGBTQ+, the working class, etc.) usually experience epistemic violence (silencing) regularly (see also Spivak, 1998; Dotson, 2011; Kinouani, 2020, Wong, 2022) as they are classed as Other within Eurocentric systems and structures (Quijano, 2000, 2007; Wynter, 2003; Lugones, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

A common, sexist example that women face is mansplaining as a form of epistemic injustice (Dular, 2021), where a man will disregard a woman's ideas or words due to the

man disregarding the woman's credibility even when evidence points to the woman's expertise. Similar examples include: disregarding the contributions of persons of colour on racism and inequalities based upon their research or lived experiences; and disregarding a disabled and/or neurodivergent colleague's lived experiences when requesting reasonable adjustments.

If the interlocutor has a knowledge gap, acknowledges and redresses this, then the harm is mitigated. However, where the interlocutor refuses to acknowledge the knowledge and lived experiences presented to them, the knowers experience epistemic violence in the form of testimonial quieting due to pernicious ignorance. Silencing harms collaboration.

To this end, I use the aforementioned theory while reflecting on a practice of silencing by using a reflective model by Rolfe et al. (2001), which follows a 'what, so what, now what' approach. I invite the reader to reflect upon their own experiences while reading.

A reflective vignette and ethical considerations

While all universities have pockets of good practices celebrated internally and externally, my role as a third space professional within higher education has allowed me to witness moments of testimonial quieting owing to pernicious ignorance. These stem from systems/structures that simultaneously advocate for collaboration while, in practice, overvalue traditional hierarchies that stifle collaboration. As Ball (2021, p.214) notes, the market principles of competition underpin how people view the world and work. These, in turn, sustain a hierarchisation of labour that presents challenges to third space professionals whose work, space and identity require flexibility and fluidity while not neatly fitting in the academic/professional services binary.

While I have omitted names and locations, my lived experience occurred within a professional services section of a large, research-intensive university in the UK that highly values good teaching and educators. I share the following example in the hopes of opening a dialogue so that people can learn from one another, and take action.

“You are not an academic.”

Professional identity comprises a mixture of what we create for ourselves through thought and action and how others experience us through what we do (Buckley, et al., 2024). Together, these create identities of third space professionals who move between and occupy the space between academic and professional services while often employed on contracts along the traditional binary of ‘academic’ versus ‘professional services’. These, in turn, can stifle mutual understanding and recognition of what third space professionals do (Whitchurch, 2023b). This vignette, therefore, considers a recurring dilemma I have faced, which might resonate.

Since 2013, my growing area of expertise has been digital education. In 2022/2023, I started experimenting with generative AI tools at the height of the generative AI buzz. My role was primarily staff-facing and focused on digital education, so generative AI fell within the remit. Colleagues across the institution and higher education were keen to learn. I was keen to share what I was learning – to empower colleagues however I could as I empathised with their angst of encountering a new, unknown set of technologies. This echoed how I and likeminded colleagues approached the dilemma of the COVID-19 pandemic, with innumerable collaborative workshops and research confirming the power of collaboration (Dale et al., 2021).

However, not all shared this view of collaboration. I was informed by a senior third space professional that because I was not an academic, my experimentations with such tools could neither be shared across the institution nor be used to develop the capabilities and literacies of staff. This view is problematic for a few reasons.

The denial of my agency in wider collaboration was predicated upon the premise that I was not an academic. The question of who could help academic/teaching staff seemingly came down to a contractual division of labour. Whitchurch (2008, p.385) would frame my work at the time as third space, closer to the academic side given the role's focus, which was almost entirely focused on leading the development of the pedagogic and digital literacies of staff to create wholly online courses. I was, in many respects, an educator educating the educators.

Upon reflection and querying the matter, the reasoning offered to me shifted: because I was not teaching, I was not in a position to support academic/teaching staff. Again, this line of reasoning is problematic for a few reasons. This reasoning reiterated the false academic/professional services divide while providing evidence of a mismatch between that role and university structures (Whitchurch, 2023b). Specifically, it disregarded how my professional services contract required expertise in pedagogy, active learning, curriculum creation and learning design while also ignoring the cumulative years of teaching experience I had. The comment silenced my professional identity as an educator by overlooking my knowledge and experiences while demonstrating a mismatch of what the role required on paper versus what the role did. In addition, the view expressed neither reflected the university's values related to inclusivity and embracing collaboration, nor institutional policies around breaking down silos and working across departments.

On reflection and following the framework that Dotson (2011) provides, I experienced silencing as testimonial quieting owing to pernicious ignorance. The silencing was harmful since the comment was informed by rationales that were both disingenuous and illogical: there was clear awareness of my contributions to successful collaborative efforts, including demonstrable praise from colleagues across the academic and professional services. The harms affected my intellectual courage (Fricker, 2007, cited in Dotson, 2011, p.243) and my epistemic agency (Townley, 2003, cited in Dotson, 2011, p.243) by denying my voice to be heard.

Still, I did not allow this to stop my experimentations with generative AI. I wrote up my experimentations as a blog and then pre-print (Hosseini, 2024). This sharing prompted colleague Nayiri Keshishi inviting me to collaborate in creating a workshop resource (Keshishi and Hosseini, 2023) that subsequently won us the LearnHigher Resource of the Year Award 2024 from the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education. We exercised agency, and we helped colleagues as a result. This led to further collaborations, including an invitation to teach postgraduate taught students using the workshop as the basis, and to much praise due to the critical nature of the session.

What I found most harmful was that the silencing, in effect, also disregarded colleagues' calls for advice and support by cutting off a line of support. A double-silencing created multiple harms by disallowing me from collaborating for the greater good. In addition, given my latest hat of studying for a doctorate in Education, the comment resonated as ill-

informed and ignorant of what third space professionals do. Such attitudes are, I argue, harmful to all third space professionals, as these represent an attempt to take away agency from third space professionals by imposing a prescribed identity (Buckley, et al., 2024). But we can counter this.

What can be done?

The reflective vignette demonstrates that third space professionals can experience a lack of recognition as educators, a disregard for their expertise, and an undermining of collaboration through silencing owing to pernicious ignorance. This happens due to the false academic/professional services that presents an identity mismatch for some if not many third space professionals.

In practical terms, regular silencing due to pernicious ignorance has parallels with examples from bullying (UCU, n.d.), such as ignoring the views and opinions of knowledgeable/experienced staff, giving trivial tasks to competent staff, and/or deliberately and ignoring or excluding competent colleagues from work projects, privileging a select few, among many others. However, understanding the existence of pernicious ignorance requires nuance. Whether harm is caused requires analysis of the ignorance displayed, the incident, power relations and other contextual factors to evidence epistemic violence due to pernicious ignorance. As Dotson (2011, p.241) contends, while a moment of silencing may or may not be harmful, 'epistemic violence concerns a practice of silencing that is harmful'. When this happens regularly and over time, this is, in effect, silencing owing to pernicious ignorance, which is a form of bullying.

Reflecting deeper, perhaps there was no intention to silence and offend. However, management that is cognisant of power and institution policies (for example, collaboration, breaking down silos, inclusivity, etc.) should empower staff rather than silence them. On balance, I recognise that universities are large, complex places. There must be a recognition that colleagues enter workplaces with the best intentions and that they can be, in effect, ruined by bad practices, especially where there is a dissonance regarding the institutional values versus its practices. Further, as bell hooks aptly states, 'patriarchy has no gender' (2010, p.170). By this, hooks affirms that patriarchy encompasses not just the actions of individuals but also how systems and structures maintain power while marginalising others, thus halting progressive change. Third space professionals should,

as I have attempted to argue, be cognisant of falling victim to testimonial quieting.

Regarding concrete suggestions, I have a few which will not be easy.

Craft your positionality and share it

I know well the value that I bring as a third space professional, so whenever I meet new colleagues with whom I collaborate, I get to know them on a personal level. I do this by outlining my professional background and some basic personal interests as this helps to lay the groundwork for a good working relationship. This has, on reflection, enabled me to develop deep rapport with collaborators while humanising my work with the colleagues I work with, thus gaining their respect and trust, and it chimes with critical and decolonial values of (re)humanising education (Freire, 2000; Wynter, 2003).

Take steps to effect cultural change.

Universities already require staff to understand the importance of information security, diversity and inclusivity, disability and reasonable adjustments via training. But they should not stop there. Joining a learning/teaching or research ethics committee or a community of practice might be a small step to effect change.

Management should be cognisant of what epistemic violence entails especially regarding testimonial quieting/silencing and its implications, which can harm collaboration and good will among others. This will require unpacking power relations and understanding how the world privileges some over others. The conversations will be difficult and necessary. Professional cultures that centre dialogue and deep listening within genuinely safe spaces are required. Genuine change to systems and structures cannot happen where third space professionals are thwarted by sustained power imbalances that privilege some based upon hierarchy alone. This process might entail developing values and regular training that imbues empathy, care and deep listening thus improving the working environment for all. I imagine these are underpinned by critical, feminist, and decolonial thinking and practices.

Take collective action to effect collaboration

Third space professionals are uniquely positioned to affect change as they (we) are often located in such spaces: we are often the social glue that brings many different students and staff together, uniquely positioned to foster, encourage and maintain relational trust

rooted in the social exchanges (Cranston, 2011) between the various parties in a place such as a university.

Therefore, we must come together and take collective action, as without us, universities would not survive long. We should create systems of professional development review that serve the needs of labour and us generally rather than the interests of the institution and management alone, as these tools, in their hands, are weapons or carrots, depending on many factors. The idea here, then, is to undertake professional development reviews of management, including the extent to which strategies and policies are implemented and the extent to which their behaviours reflect values espoused by a university.

Another example is addressing systemic and structural issues collectively that raises everyone up by addressing inequalities through horizontal dialogue that disrupts power relations, as interrogating the roots can allow us to understand how epistemic violence and silencing happens. This will include unlearning and relearning via meaningful training for the institution and those in management/leadership that allows colleagues to perform at their best while considering their needs to do well. It is not the individuals with different abilities that need to change; it is the systems and structures (for example, management and leadership, human resources, etc.) that must change. Otherwise, the strategies and policies in place are meaningless.

Source and share good practices

While institutions attempt to gather data via yearly surveys on institutional culture and practices, more is needed. I advocate for senior leadership to look for good practices based on a mixture of evidence, practical wisdom and feedback from colleagues to celebrate these while actively encouraging their implementation elsewhere. A collective, critical questioning of how the good practices work and how these can be applied more widely across an institution and higher education generally can aid this process.

Read, reflect and write

Finally, documenting what is said and learning from this can allow us to challenge moments of epistemic violence. Reading, reflecting and writing offer numerous opportunities for resistance (Buckley, et al., 2024) as these can allow us to make sense of experiences, shine light on them and present calls to action.

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