



## Truly emergent? A critique of 'third space' in cross-cultural context

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this piece is to critique Celia Whitchurch's influential third space theory in cross-cultural context. Whitchurch first describes third space in a 2008 paper as an 'emerging landscape of activity' (p. 378) correlative with an 'emergence of *Third Space* professionals' (p. 377) in first world anglophone higher education institutions. By theorising the emergence of third space from the activity of these so-called 'third space professionals', Whitchurch implicitly relies upon a concept first developed several decades earlier in cultural theory. Most notably, Homi K. Bhabha discusses his own conception of third space in response to questions about his ground-breaking 1988 essay 'The commitment to theory', in which he appears to first introduce the term 'third space' in a relevant context. Problematically, however, there appear to be substantial inconsistencies between Whitchurch's and Bhabha's third space theories. The three most significant of these are: 1) the key distinction, introduced by Bhabha, between cultural difference and cultural diversity; 2) the broader concepts of identity and identification upon which Whitchurch and Bhabha rely; and 3) their respective relations to the history of colonialism and corresponding commitments to divergent neo-colonial and postcolonial projects. Based on these discrepancies, I contend that, whereas Bhabha's third space seems truly cross-culturally emergent, Whitchurch's third space only appears to be so within a more limited cultural context. Accordingly, I conclude by proposing two further ways in which learning developers should uphold the commitment to a critical cross-cultural approach.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural; postcolonial; neo-colonial; cultural difference; identity; third space theory.

## **Introduction**

Since its inception in the work of Celia Whitchurch (Whitchurch, 2006; 2008), third space has become an increasingly popular concept for theorising the activity of certain higher education professionals whose work often straddles academic and professional services. However, with few recent exceptions (Hall, 2022; Ody, 2022), there has been little corresponding critical attention paid to this notable trend. This is surprising not only insofar as higher education prides itself on criticality as a paramount value, but also to the extent that third space has its conceptual origins not in higher education studies, but rather in critical cultural theory. Accordingly, the issue on which I would like to focus this piece concerns the appropriateness of theorising something like an 'emergence of third space settings' in first world anglophone higher education institutions within a cross-cultural context. My argument entails that it may not be appropriate to apply third space theory to higher education in this context, at least not in the manner that Whitchurch proposes. I argue that such application appears inconsistent with three critical cross-cultural commitments that motivated the concept's originator, Homi K. Bhabha, to theorise a third space in the first place. Based on my argument, I conclude with two proposals that are intended to help learning developers more consciously uphold these critical cross-cultural commitments in their own working practices.

## ***The emergence of third space***

To critique Whitchurch's third space theory, it is necessary to discuss the emergence of this theory in further detail. Whitchurch herself discusses the origins of third space as a concept most explicitly in her 2013 monograph (Whitchurch, 2013). There, Whitchurch stipulates that she uses third space 'as a way of exploring groups of staff in higher education who do not fit conventional binary descriptors', whilst at the same time acknowledging that the concept 'has its roots in the field of cultural studies... and major social dimensions such as race, gender and class' (Whitchurch, 2013, p.21). Here, Whitchurch cites Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said, 1979) as a foundational text for cultural studies' concept of third space, which she sees as developed further around a decade later in the work of cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha, who first coins the term 'third space'. However, as noted by Bhabha, the impetus for a third space theory predates Said's work. During the 1960s and earlier 1970s, a movement took place within Latin American activist

filmmaking called 'Third Cinema' ('Tercer Cine'). In 1986, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival held a three-day conference on this movement, to which Bhabha was invited to present a concluding paper (Bhabha, 1988). Responding to a context in which, as Bhabha puts it, 'a large film festival in the West' is being used to host a conference on work by 'Third World filmmakers and critics', Bhabha introduces a theory of third space in this paper dedicated to the work of Third Cinema as an attempt, in his words, to take 'the cultural and historical hybridity of the post-colonial world as the paradigmatic place of departure' (Bhabha, 1988, p.7). Accordingly, Bhabha conceives of third space in this paper as a cross-cultural concept similarly poised to critique the 'institutional power and ideological Eurocentricity' of a Western audience that chooses to engage with what he calls 'Third World texts' (Bhabha, 1988, p.16), such as Third Cinema's films and written manifestos.

A related question of critical importance thereby emerges as to whether Whitchurch's third space theory is similarly attuned to the critical cross-cultural commitments of Bhabha's original conception. Bearing in mind Whitchurch's significant differences in focus and intention from Bhabha's, I contend that there are nonetheless at least three aspects of her third space theory that appear markedly inconsistent with these commitments which are of critical importance for learning development. These are: 1) what third space considers in terms of cultural difference and cultural diversity; 2) where to position third space with respect to concepts of cultural identity and cultural identification; and 3) how third space may serve as the basis for either neo-colonial or postcolonial cultural projects.

### **Cultural difference vs. cultural diversity**

For Bhabha, there is a key distinction between 'cultural difference as opposed to cultural diversity' (Bhabha, 1990, p.207). Bhabha clearly expresses his suspicion toward the latter insofar as the concept of cultural diversity appears to sustain both a Western colonising 'containment' of cultural difference through the essentialism inherent in an implicit hierarchy of cultural identities as well as the often attendant 'racism... in various forms' (1990, p.208). By contrast, Bhabha argues that the concept of cultural difference recognises what he refers to as the 'incommensurability' between cultures, or the idea that the differences between cultures cannot 'be accommodated within a universalist framework' (1990, p.209). In recognising the incommensurability of cultural difference, Bhabha thereby sees third space as a 'position of liminality' in which what he calls 'cultural

translation' (p.211) becomes possible through the idea that cultural difference can only be understood through ongoing acts of mutual cross-cultural interpretation.

For Whitchurch, by contrast, third space emerges within a more limited field of what she calls 'diversity'. That this field appears limited to a select range of institutions in only three mainly anglophone countries of the first world is apparent from its initial and ongoing basis in 'empirical work in [the UK], Australia, and [the US]' (2008, p.379). Although the scope of Whitchurch's initial research includes a set of institutions from only three countries that also share many aspects of the same academic culture and language, she nonetheless intends 'to explore the increasingly diverse forms of professional that are emerging in higher education' (2008, p.378). Contrasting with Bhabha's commitment to the cross-cultural approach implied in recognising cultural difference, Whitchurch ultimately theorises a more limited international commitment to a universalising 'cultural diversity'.

### **Identity vs. identification**

For Whitchurch, moreover, third space theory is meant to provide a basis for specific forms of identity. Accordingly, she states that she 'used the concept of identity to theorise [her own] empirical work' (2008, p.379). Whitchurch primarily locates her conception of identity with respect to the positional theory of identity introduced by Stuart Hall (1988) as well as the social realist theory developed by Margaret Archer (2000). While Hall's and Archer's theories are very different from each other, both are arguably committed to a more monocultural approach to identity, i.e. in terms of presupposing for a distinct cultural identity – in some sense 'one, shared culture' (Hall, 1989, p.69), as the former puts it.

By contrast, Bhabha appears explicitly to reject relating third space to any such monocultural identity. Instead, Bhabha claims to theorise third space in terms of an explicitly 'psychoanalytic analogy (of) identification' (1990, p.211). Though he does not explicitly provide a locus for the 'psychoanalytic sense' of identification that he has in mind, Bhabha's further definition of identification as both a 'process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness' as well as his characterisation of such identification as 'always ambivalent' (1990, p.211) are seemingly at odds with Hall's and Archer's respective theories of identity, and thus with the conception of identity that Whitchurch employs based on them. By contrast, Bhabha's refusal to rely on any statically

defined concept of cultural identity and favouring of a more flexible concept of cultural identification evinces a greater commitment to a cross-cultural approach.

### **Neo-colonial vs. postcolonial**

Finally, Whitchurch appears to view the domain of third space implicitly in terms of an ongoing colonising endeavour within higher education. Whitchurch accordingly conceives her third space theory's aim as a successful occupation of 'emerging territory' (2008, p.377) on behalf of relatively delimited categories of higher education professional staff. Whitchurch can thus ultimately describe, without apparent concern for the potential cross-cultural connotations of this wording, a third space 'which is colonised primarily by less *bounded* forms of professional' (2008, p.377). Rather than postcolonial, Whitchurch's third space theory is thereby, at least symbolically, neo-colonial.

By contrast, Bhabha sees the domain of third space in terms of a space for practices of cross-cultural reflection based on a commitment to post-colonial 'hybridity'. As Bhabha writes: 'hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge' (1990, p.211). In emphasising hybridity, Bhabha draws attention to the fact that what he calls a 'postcolonial perspective' requires us to think more critically about the 'limitations of a consensual and 'collusive' liberal sense of community' (Bhabha, 1990, p.219), e.g. the limitations of a sense of community based on a logic of territorialisation via inequitable partnerships. Although some recent authors (such as Bhandari, 2022, who draws on Abou-Agag, 2021) have criticised Bhabha's theory of third space as neo-colonial for its supposed failure to attend sufficiently to its own socioeconomic preconditions, it is nevertheless clear that Bhabha's third space theory is postcolonial in a sense that Whitchurch's is not.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, I maintain that the most important distinction between Bhabha's and Whitchurch's third space theories is that only the former seems consistently committed to an emergent cross-cultural context. Consider, for instance, how Bhabha defines third space in such a way that it not only 'gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable' but also most notably provides 'a new area of negotiation of meaning and

representation' (Bhabha, 1990, p.211). This new area is something particularly valuable, especially for those unfairly impacted by the history of colonialism and its ongoing cross-cultural ramifications in a post-colonial world. By contrast, Whitchurch's third space appears to emerge at most as a theory within a more limited monocultural context. This is the case insofar as Whitchurch's third space theory focuses on a singular higher education culture formed by the emergence of large-scale collaborative projects and conducted by defined groups of professional staff within institutions of the anglophone first world.

For these reasons, I conclude with two alternative proposals for learning developers concerning how to better maintain the critical cross-cultural commitments that motivated Bhabha's original third space theory.

First, we should pay more attention not to the abstract identities of so-called 'third space professionals' in higher education, but rather to the activity of learning developers that emerges in a cross-cultural context. Regarding the latter, for instance, Xiaowei Zhou and Pilcher (2018) explicitly contrast the idea of 'comfortable third spaces', such as that proposed by Whitchurch, to the 'inescapable and often uncomfortable facet of individuals' intercultural communication experiences even in the microcosm of a (institutionalised) learning context' (p.5). This acknowledgement that third space cannot ever only remain a safe space in a cross-cultural context also seems consistent with Hall's (2022) recently influential critique that 'third space working as conceived by Whitchurch... may distract practitioners from tackling the barriers that constrict institutional learning and educational development in a strategic way' (p.27). As learning developers, we all should be especially aware of such 'barriers' that manifest at both the institutional and individual levels as hindrances to effective cross-cultural collaboration, such as manifestations of what Holliday (2022) would call the 'thread-block struggle' (p.372) in our work with colleagues and students alike.

Second, we should pay more attention not to Whitchurch's third space theory, but to the more specific forms of cross-cultural collaboration already emerging in learning development. As Ody (2022) notes in a critique of Whitchurch's third space theory, the 'macro labelling of types of roles/space' can be 'hindering', for it is ultimately 'the characteristics of individuals/roles, their approach and the types of projects [that] are essential in fostering partnerships and collaboration' (p.201). In terms of the latter, a recent volume (Abegglen et al., 2023) focuses on several instances of successful cross-cultural

collaboration in learning development, including in an entire chapter devoted to relevant decolonising approaches (see pp.165-167 for an overview). Moreover, Arthur's (2023) recent proposal for a 'pedagogy of race consciousness' also holds promise for further cross-cultural collaborative learning development partnerships, namely, as 'a means to not only value students' home culture, but also draw from this culture to develop their innate critical thinking abilities' (p.2). For ultimately, such critical cross-cultural collaboration is something that we as learning developers should all seek to achieve.

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