



Revisiting principles of partnership working in the third space

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed significant shifts within higher education, prompting institutions to re-evaluate their approaches to partnership working. Collaborative efforts across institutional domains gained prominence, underlining the strategic importance of third-space professionals in facilitating agile decision-making and solution implementation. Here, they demonstrated resilience and adaptability, navigating the pandemic's complexities while addressing the tandem feelings of messiness and uncertainty. They cultivated open mindsets and embraced a playful praxis, one emergent as an essential strategy for fostering trust and facilitating social learning amidst change. However, recognition and reward for such professionals remain complex, being at times hindered by the fluidity of their roles and fragmented nature of institutional acknowledgment. Our contention is that the culture evident during the pandemic that fostered meaningful collaborative practices and amplified third-space professionals is in danger of being lost.

Initially discussed by Parkes, Blackwell Young, and Cleaver (2016), this opinion piece revisits five principles of partnership working in the context of third-space working. These principles emphasised a need for understanding motivations for collaboration; the necessity of strategic support; provision of suitable reward and recognition systems; developing a culture that embraces change that is fostered through honesty and openness. If universities are to be successful in addressing the ever-evolving 'wicked' problems roaming the higher education landscape, a sustainable collective approach underpinned by the five principles remain.

Keywords: COVID-19; collaboration; principles for practice.

Between 2012 and 2014, Parkes et al. (2014) investigated partnership work between academic and professional staff within Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom. This initial work underscored the significance of third-space professionals – individuals operating across institutional boundaries – as key facilitators of collaboration. Drawing on insights from Whitchurch (2013) and Macfarlane (2011), this study highlighted the critical role these professionals play in enhancing university functions in tandem with student success.

In our chapter ‘Making partnerships work: practical strategies for building successful collaborations’ (Parkes, Blackwell Young and Cleaver, 2016), we outlined five principles for effective partnership working:

1. Motivations: Understand motivations for developing the partnership, and the extent to which they may go on to help or hinder the development and sustainability of collaborations.
2. Strategic support: Recognise that strategic support is necessary if partnerships are to be successful and sustainable to affect institutional change.
3. Reward and recognition: Ensure suitable reward and/or recognition systems are in place for staff and students involved in partnership activities.
4. Change and its implications: Recognise the organic nature of change and prepare those involved for feelings of messiness, uncertainty, and anxiety.
5. Open culture: Develop a culture of honesty, openness, and disclosure to underpin the workings of each partnership.

In this opinion piece, we further conceptualise these principles in relation to third-space professionals. To do this, we revisit the context of those principles in 2012-2014 and consider how these played out during the pandemic and what that means for the current and future role of the third-space professional.

The pre-pandemic scene

Catalysed by the diversification of university student demographics following UK educational reforms in the 1990s, the rise of ‘student experience’ rhetoric across HE underscored the need for integrated practices (Parkes et al., 2014). Previously regarded

as separate from the academic aspects of the university experience, this highlighted the importance of collaboration across various university departments, such as careers, learning development, and library support. Indeed, Thomas's influential work (2012) emphasises the crucial role of such collaborative approaches in fostering student success that underpinned Principle 1 around motivations for partnership and the importance of strategic support.

In 2017, the Higher Education Research Act established the Office for Students in England, intensifying the focus on value for money and student-as-consumer narratives. Despite variations in drivers across the UK, discussions on impact and value for money have persisted (House of Lords, 2018; Scottish Funding Council, 2021). Drawing on Freire (1968; 2013), hooks (1994), and Collini (2012), student-as-consumer narratives were, and continue to be, resisted (see Zepke, 2018; Seal, 2021). These instead conceptualise HE as a transformational experience concerned with the development of critical thinking, self-awareness, and exposure to diverse perspectives rather than as a financial transaction. The relationships, skills, and critical spaces associated with third-space professionals (Stoltenkamp et al., 2017) place them in an important position in developing and delivering this transformative experience. They have a comprehensive understanding of various institutional activities related to the student experience. Thus, strategic support for this work emerged, although has been inconsistently implemented (Principle 2).

Despite the growing importance of third-space professionals as key partnership brokers, our 2014 analysis highlighted that 'promotion and reward structures may not have evolved to take into account such collaborative work' (Principle 3). Third-space activities often fall outside traditional reward and recognition structures that frequently emphasise traditional research paradigms, leading to a lack of institutional recognition (Rhoades, 2009). As Blackwell Young and Millard (2023) discuss, at this time there was an emerging body of literature around partnership with students (e.g., Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011; Millard et al., 2013; Healey et al., 2014) that was driven largely by third-space professionals. Many in our original study felt that whilst flexibility and organic change was a feature of successful collaboration, a sense of messiness can heighten anxiety for some (Principle 4). In recognition of this, the 2014 project emphasised the importance of open communications (Principle 5) to address any perception of chaos and/or uncertainty. Underscoring this principle is a requirement for transparency from institutional leadership

to foster trust so that a unified sense of purpose is cultivated. We now explore how these principles fared during and beyond the pandemic.

During the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant upheaval across the HE sector, prompting a profound transformation in how institutions operated. The March 2020 UK lockdown measures necessitated a fundamental shift in supporting learning, teaching, and assessment practices within HE. Universities understood the motivations for developing their practices (Principle 1), with the pandemic re-orienting institutional focus from issues of quantification, performativity, and value for money towards building collaborative efforts aimed at supporting student success amidst unprecedented challenges. This shift illuminated the strategic importance of third-space professionals (Principle 2), with senior managers increasingly relying on their expertise for agile decision-making and rapid implementation of solutions. As a result, the voice and status of third-space professionals were recognised and amplified (Principle 3), emphasising the need for distributed leadership and adaptability. This elevation in status positioned them as essential catalysts for change within HE institutions (e.g., Singer et al., 2021). Throughout the pandemic, third-space professionals leveraged their knowledge, expertise, and extensive networks to lead and facilitate critical conversations, both internally and externally, serving as 'positive disruptors' in navigating the complexities of the crisis (Akerman, 2020). Quinsee (2022) further illustrates the pivotal role of third-space leadership during times of crisis, with these professionals being increasingly involved in strategic discussions and operational planning, including contingency measures and the transition to online operations.

During Covid, the rapid pace of the pivot to online working necessitated swift action, a process that often felt messy and organic. Maybe because of the scale of the pandemic, such mess or chaos was more accepted. Hughes, Cureton, and Jones (2021) discuss feelings of chaos in navigating university systems and processes during this time, particularly as regulatory changes were swiftly implemented to accommodate unprecedented student need. Despite this inherent uncertainty, third-space professionals demonstrated remarkable adaptability in managing the evolving landscape and supporting others in how to adapt to feelings of messiness, uncertainty, and anxiety (Principle 4). Their familiarity with navigating such complexities and managing uncertainty potentially

mitigated any discomfort felt, although it is important to acknowledge the toll this may have taken on their own overall wellbeing. In response to this uncertainty, openness and transparency (Principle 5) emerged as vital components for effective collaboration among staff and students. Institutions found themselves compelled to unite across all domains, driven by a collective sense of vulnerability and the imperative for mutual support. Third-space professionals played a pivotal role in fostering such transparency and collaboration, sharing their expertise, and facilitating sector-wide discourse through various online platforms and events (e.g., *Pedagogy and Pancakes* by Chris Headland, 2024).

The pandemic consequently served as a levelling force, distributing control and fostering a sense of shared ownership and partnership across the HE sector (Denney, 2022; Nutt and McIntosh, 2022). In Scotland particularly, where a culture of openness and collaboration was already ingrained, existing networks facilitated rapid collaborative efforts, aided by established trust and cross-institutional relationships. Institutions thus embraced new working methodologies and a strengthening of cross-institutional ties.

Post-pandemic

So where does that leave third-space professionals and the 2016 principles in a post-pandemic world? Have we managed to capitalise on some of the positives coming out of the pandemic? Certainly, the rationale for collaborative efforts and third-space working across institutional domains remains evident (Principle 1), if only to attend to such issues of student wellbeing, addressing the cost-of-living crisis, and/or facilitating the success of the 'Covid cohort' whose educational experiences to date have been disrupted. While the pandemic presented formidable challenges, it also catalysed opportunities for collaboration and third-space working across institutional domains from senior leadership, engendering strategic support (Principle 2). The imperative to attend to such wicked, complex problems in HE such as student retention, engagement, progression, decolonisation, and mental wellbeing has propelled strategic efforts, although their implementation may vary across institutions. Ensuring suitable recognition and reward for third-space professionals (Principle 3) remains complex due to the fluidity of their roles, which often transcend conventional organisational boundaries of research, teaching, services, administration, or knowledge transfer (Whitchurch, 2013). Despite external accolades (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022b), internal institutional acknowledgment can be

fragmented, hindering career progression. This indicates a discrepancy in acknowledging their work compared with more 'traditional' roles (Black, 2024). Indeed, Akerman's (2020) 'institutional blindness' continues wherein 'non-academic' roles, pivotal during crises like the pandemic, have faded into obscurity afterward, despite their significant impact as 'positive disruptors' (Akerman, 2020).

Amidst uncertainties, third-space professionals demonstrated resilience and adaptability during the pandemic. Our earlier work acknowledged that some such professionals struggle with feelings of messiness that often accompany change and uncertainty. It remains the case to acknowledge this, addressing the accompanying feelings of messiness and uncertainty in supporting people to navigate change effectively (Principle 4). Holford tells us that cultivating open mindsets and embracing playful praxis can foster trust and facilitate social learning (2023, pp.472-6). This demonstrates that what matters, as exemplified in the pandemic, are the relationships we experience, being composite of those small, micro-moments (Taylor, 2017) that complexity theory tells us are collectively impactful (Boulton et al., 2015). We must not lose our awareness of the importance of this. As noted earlier, the pandemic fostered a culture of honesty and openness in practice (Denney, 2022; Nutt and McIntosh, 2022) (Principle 5), which we must preserve. Reverting to siloed working environments undermines our collaborative efforts that proved effective during this crisis. Cross-sector openness, particularly evident in the Scottish sector, has been a strength and should be further cultivated. Yet, it is our contention that the transformative potential of pandemic-induced changes remains underappreciated, emphasising the need for compassionate practices that embrace change and uncertainty for individual and collective flourishing. By doing so, we can prepare and develop an adaptable HE environment that is better equipped to navigate the super complexities of our world.

Final thoughts

As we look towards the evolving future landscape of HE, the importance of third-space professionals is increasingly clear. The pandemic underscored our ability to drive transformative change and facilitate meaningful collaboration across institutional boundaries. Yet, the recognition and support for our roles remains uneven, and there is the risk of reverting to fragmented practices.

Moving forward, it is crucial for third-space professionals to continue advocating for the value of their contributions, ensuring that the lessons learned during the pandemic are not forgotten. Reward and recognition systems must be collectively promoted to reflect the impact of such work. So too must the culture of openness, honesty, and collaboration be maintained, as this has proven to be so effective. Third-space professionals must continue to shape a more resilient and adaptive HE environment that prioritises the wellbeing and success of the entire university community. By doing so, we can maintain a well-equipped university sector that is able to navigate future challenges and complexities.

Acknowledgements

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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