



Careering into third space activism as a non-academic in HE

Stephanie Larkin

University College Cork, Ireland

Abstract

This case study takes the form of autoethnography to outline the experience of a non-academic third space practitioner embarking on their first professional research project. It outlines how accessing professional networks to seek support to deliver a research project can widen the third space and draw others into it. It shows how third space workers can become activists for the space while developing their network, increasing their visibility, and enhancing the student journey. In doing so, they can take control of their own career trajectory.

Keywords: third space; practitioner; network; collaboration; theory and practice.

Introduction

Imagine yourself on the sidelines of a game you know and want to play, without the means to offer your insights and skills: how would you feel? Without a means to channel this creative energy, what might happen? Substitute your place of work for the game, and frustration might arise due to a foreclosed career and unrealised potential. Such disempowerment might lead to apathy and disengagement.

This autoethnographic study uncovers how I careered into the so-called third space (Whitchurch, 2008) in higher education (HE). It outlines how structural and cultural positioning in HE (Joubert, 2024) can help and hinder the channelling of 'energy' across boundaries to connect and create together. Motivated by my urge to play a part in the game, I embraced vulnerability, took a risk, and engaged my professional network, to be the support I needed while building trust and credibility to resist structural boundaries.

Third space collaboration followed, and I delivered my first professional research project and enhanced my professional identity, leading to personal empowerment and agency. My hitherto locally bounded commitment to student success became unbounded, visible, and available on an institutional stage, enabled by collaboration with students and academic colleagues.

Background

Role

My role as a placement manager supports the strategic mission of the university in the area of student experience and success, and is the interface between students, the institute, and employers. My structural position is defined by my administrative contract, while culturally I am based in an academic department. This positioning makes me feel like I am an insider-outsider (Joubert, 2024). Ideas I have to offer are literally sidelined by my contractual position. The knowledge I have to contribute has almost no place to be harnessed and acknowledged beyond my department due to the institutional structure.

I hold a mixed portfolio of work, contributing to activities that span both academic and professional arenas. I direct a placement programme which entails working closely with students, graduates, academic staff, professional staff, and industry stakeholders. I have what Whitchurch (2024) refers to as 'collaborative capital' arising from 'Mode 3, in-practice knowledge that involves user communities' (p.2, p.11). My role is underpinned by collaboration and involvement in networks and communities of practice both inside and outside the institute.

My role does not require me to be a careers practitioner, but this identity, knowledge, and way of being define my teaching and interactions with students and colleagues, while also providing the contribution I make to the career learning and professional development curriculum within my undergraduate programme.

Identity

I see myself as an unbounded or blended professional as described by Whitchurch (2008) with multiple identities: practitioner, teacher, manager, and administrator. My guidance

counsellor identity has become the source from which all others flow. I apply the core conditions of person-centred therapy, the practice of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and authenticity, to underpin my relationships and work.

Reaching this point has not been easy or predictable, hence the title of this article. Unexpectedly finding myself in a teaching role several years ago and feeling very unqualified, set in train a learning journey. I gained academic qualifications in teaching and learning and career guidance counselling to enable me to support the students I work with. In that process I had a career awakening, finding the synergy between career counselling, career learning, and the scholarship of teaching and learning stimulating and rewarding. Embedding employability and career learning within the curriculum of an academic programme is increasingly seen as the most effective way to engage learners in career development. This is where I see my contribution within the third space. Producing and contributing knowledge is mostly what defines academia, and Joubert (2024) relates research in HE to the construction and reconstruction of professional identity in a way that resonates with me. It is a way of underpinning practice, to validate identity, inform teaching, and to get recognition from the institute. My knowledge, based on my practice, was something I wanted to share, but my position and the university structure circumscribed this. I felt disempowered and excluded and I struggled to find a way to counter this. The ways I found are my forms of resistance and gave rise to what I call my third space activism. This space allows me to bring all aspects of my identity forward together.

Structure

Whitchurch (2008) outlines how structures and boundaries operate to facilitate or hinder third space activity. She describes bounded, unbounded, and cross-boundary professionals. The structure of roles in third level is essentially binary: academic or professional. Different promotional criteria and competencies attach to each. As a blended professional, my role zig zags in and out of this divide. Campbell-Perry (2022) describes this perspective and how it reveals possibilities for collaboration and boundary-spanning projects. The binary structure makes accessing and feeling legitimate in the academic space to develop this collaboration complex. I am excluded from academic spaces and discourses based on my professional role and contract, even though I teach and am a practitioner. I see many opportunities to contribute to evidence-based practices and

policies but have no structural outlet or resources to research my ideas. In this context, the third space can offer not just a space, but a safe enough space, to experiment, test ideas and gain legitimacy.

Careering in a binary HE structure

In the early months of Covid-19, I volunteered with a group of academic colleagues in my school to form a digital learning and teaching group. I was and am the only professional staff member of the group. The value we created led to the group being incorporated into the official governance structure of the school as the Digital Learning and Teaching Committee (DLTC). When the terms of reference for the committee were written, I was omitted from the committee as I was not an academic. I had to argue my case to be allowed to remain. Legitimacy, credibility, and credentials all came to the fore for me in that moment as I was required to validate my contribution.

Little and Green's (2022) credibility framework outlines the centrality of trustworthiness and credibility for non-academics to enable change in academic practices in HE from in-between spaces. The article is written from an educational developer perspective, but it is one I can relate to fully. The credibility and professional trustworthiness I built via the DLTC empowered me to begin my third space research journey and build legitimacy in the wider institute.

About 18 months ago, I applied for a small research fund available within the university for digital inclusion research. Applying to this fund felt risky for me. I was entering the academic arena on my own, with a research idea I was unsure would be valid in that space as it arose from my practice. I had never applied to a research fund before and it made me feel vulnerable to put myself in this position. Feeling vulnerable, but also feeling bold within that, were feelings I had to confront on this journey. I took this significant step because the academic leading the call was a member of the DLTC. I believed I had credibility with her based on our professional relationship. This made it feel safe enough to do something that otherwise felt risky due to my professional status. My research proposal was successful, and I entered the research space.

Practice and theory, research and practice

The idea for my research project arose from practice with students. Guidance practice and my role in teaching and assessment offers me first hand insight into how students experience transitions in, through, and out of HE, in particular the transition into work placement. This is the Mode 3 knowledge Whitchurch (2024) refers to. Underpinning this was a theoretical understanding of transition experiences from my dissertation for my guidance counsellor qualification. The motivation for choosing this research topic was to enhance the student journey and experience in HE. The aim was to do research and develop a practical exercise based on the research. As a practitioner, I wanted to create something that could be used in practice.

My research application proposed to research and create a digitally inclusive exercise to help students visualise their social support network to help navigate transitions. According to Anderson et al. (2022), a transition is taking place if any of the four areas of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions, are changing. The more of these that are changing, the more significant is the transition. During a transition, access to our usual support network can be disrupted, which may impact our ability to manage the change (Anderson et al., 2022). Anderson et al. (2022) definition highlights the flux that students can encounter transitioning in, through, and out of higher education as they confront planned, unplanned, and non-event transitions. This flux can cause them to stall, fail, and face hardship which affects their day-to-day functioning. My research aimed to equip students to prepare for this and build some resilience into their learning journey.

Collaboration in third space

Based on my research and conceptualisation of social support, a reflective exercise using scenarios was devised using a digital format to enable the visualisation of an individual's social support network. I reached the stage where I needed external feedback on the digital exercise. I contacted and consulted with a student of mine who was working in digital accessibility in the university part time. I explained the premise of my research and the exercise I was working on.

This student partnership and perspective proved to be key to getting my project off the ground. My student consultant reviewed early versions of the exercise and advised me on technical solutions, and on the accessibility functions within them that would help me make

the tool more digitally inclusive. He also gave me a student perspective on the value of it to students and whether he thought it would be helpful. His reaction was very positive; he saw how it could support his journey and became very engaged in our work together based on the value he saw in it.

My research plan included running a workshop to trial my research. I needed advice to find out if ethical approval was needed to do this. My location in an academic department helped as I have academic colleagues in my network. A female academic colleague, with expertise on research ethics, whom I have a trusted working relationship with through my role, introduced me to the head of the university health service to discuss my idea to get their view. This pushed me out of my usual structural zone of activity and into unexpected contact with senior officers of the university beyond my network and normal remit. Now my credibility as a researcher came to the fore as I needed to introduce myself, explain the merits of my project, my vision for it, and request feedback. This meeting was crucial as I felt vulnerable as a non-academic doing research. It provided external validation for my project and a recommendation of who to contact next.

I had further consultations with other central student support functions. My consultations confirmed the tool as an enabling and agency-building exercise for students to engage with. It was seen as a skill-building exercise to support transitioning in, through, and out of the university. This was important and gave me confidence that my project was valid, and the impetus and motivation to keep going with something I had never done before.

Theory into practice

The next step was to pilot the digital tool with students in a workshop. Despite teaching large groups of students over several years, I found myself procrastinating with credibility and legitimacy to the fore again.

To help resist this, I reached into my academic network once more. This time to another female colleague who designs and runs workshops for research projects. Immediately, she offered excellent advice and crucially offered to collaborate with me to run the workshop. She stepped into the third space with me to support and collaborate on a student experience research project. According to Campbell-Perry (2022):

A potential barrier to the joining up of the student journey through collaboration is the perceived divide between academic and professional staff which may reduce and even prevent collaborative working within an institution (p.115).

In this instance, I believe the social and professional capital I had with this colleague led her to see me as a credible and trustworthy partner.

The online workshop to validate my research and test the digital exercise I designed used collaborative technology, scenario stories, and small breakout groups with the student participants. I gathered valuable feedback for the next iteration of my research. This moment was important. I had researched, conceptualised, and created a digital exercise originating from my practice. I honed it, tested it with students, and delivered it with an academic colleague.

Though originally envisaged as a standalone resource, the feedback has led me to see the value in delivering the digital exercise via the workshop. Participants noted the benefit of attending the workshop. They found it effective and helpful to learn about social support networks using activities, collaborative digital tools, followed by discussing scenarios in small groups to identify useful support, and then to identify their own social support network using the digital tool. I believe my experience as both a practitioner and teacher contributed to this experience.

Challenges and unexpected outcomes

Integrating a researcher identity into my self-concept is an ongoing process. The collaborators I worked with, students, academics, and central services colleagues, all played a role. Feeling vulnerable professionally is uncomfortable, especially when seeking help outside my usual space and network. In the spirit of third space activism, I like to think that I expanded the space around me by asking others to step into it with me, to create something together to equip students for their journey through the university.

I discovered a shared interest with the academic colleague who did the workshop with me. She has offered to run the workshop with me again for our incoming first year students to support their transition into HE. She is now a third space activist from the academic side, and we have a research project together on professional development in the curriculum. The 'feeling vulnerable and being bold' dichotomy of my story is important. As a teacher, I

counsel my students to take risks to learn. Modelling this behaviour is important for my practitioner identity as it aligns my practice with my theory.

The workshop feedback suggested some variations on the digital exercise. Due to workload constraints, I decided to ask the student consultant I worked with at the outset if he would be interested in trying to do something with it for his final year project (FYP). The objective of the FYP is to take a problem and build a digital solution. He was pleased with this opportunity and has confirmed during our consultations that it has been very helpful for him to work on a project he believes in and that resonates with his learning experience. He also values our working relationship which he says has sustained him through his iteration of the project. His iteration of the digital exercise takes it to a new level. His involvement gives it authenticity, being co-created with a student transitioning in, through, and out of the university. For me, it brings the student experience and success narrative full circle and demonstrates the potential of the third space in HE.

Conclusion

A showcase event was organised for the research projects that received the funding. It was hosted by the deputy president and registrar, which made my work visible on an institutional level. Participating in this reinforced my third space identity. However, the balance of presentations was entirely on the academic side. This highlights a need to find ways to encourage and support non-academic third space professionals to resist the HE structure and take up space on the institutional stage to validate this way of working (Akerman, 2022). I have written this case study so that my strategies and experience are available to others. Producing evidence of how collaboration between academic and professional staff can enhance the student journey and can lead to less transition flux for students is important. The third space is the place where that can be done.

The qualifications I pursued have made my decision to take up space in the third space seem possible. A lack of experience with research is a barrier I have discussed frequently with other non-academic third space workers. Our knowledge, expertise, and ideas coexist with frustration at having no resources or outlet to explore and contribute specialist knowledge and understandings. We all want to play the game, enhance the student experience and our careering opportunities. To this end, it would be very helpful to include

non-academic third space workers in research training activities in HE or to create training resources or mentorship specifically for us. Apart from learning and teaching activities, the institute does not engage with us as potential contributors to the field. Supporting opportunities to pursue further relevant qualifications is another way of addressing this (Akerman, 2022).

Accessing my departmental network and the collaboration available through that made my research project a success in my view. The fact that I was based in an academic department and already working in a 'blended' way between academic and professional spheres, and that I was aware of that, was helpful. In the meantime, I have been selected as co-chair of the DTLC where this journey began. I have since become a partner on other learning and teaching research projects, informing and shaping the practice of my academic colleagues in the areas of student engagement and career development in the curriculum. I continue to develop my third space activism and professional identity, which empowers me to create the career trajectory I want for myself and to invite others into the third space with me.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the students I work with each academic year, that journey of discovery we take is the catalyst for my activism. I also wish to thank the colleagues who trusted me enough to enter the third space with me, and who continue to be activists within it.

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

References

Akerman, K. (2022) 'Close encounters of the third kind', in E. McIntosh and D. Nutt (eds) *The impact of the integrated practitioner in higher education*. London: Routledge, pp.126-132.

- Anderson, M., Goodman, J. and Schlossberg, N. K. (2022) *Counseling adults in transition: linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world*. 5th edn. Springer Publishing Company.
- Campbell-Perry, S. (2022) 'The blended professional: barriers and boundaries to collaborative institutional cultures' in E. McIntosh and D. Nutt (eds.) *The impact of the integrated practitioner in higher education*. London: Routledge, pp.115-125.
- Joubert, M. (2024) 'The liminal space: academic literacies practitioners' construction of professional identity in the betwixt and between', *London Review of Education*, 22 (1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.22.1.15>
- Little, D. and Green, D.A. (2022) 'Credibility in educational development: trustworthiness, expertise, and identification', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 41(3), pp.804-819. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1871325>
- Whitchurch, C. (2008) 'Shifting identities and blurring boundaries: the emergence of third space professionals in UK higher education', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(4), pp. 377-396.
- Whitchurch, C. (2024) 'From 'service' to 'partnership': harnessing social capital in support of activity in third space environments', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 46(3), pp.243-256. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2024.2344132>

Author details

Stephanie Larkin is the placement programme manager of an undergraduate degree in Business Information Systems. She also coordinates and teaches on the professional development curriculum of this degree and contributes to the ongoing development of this curriculum using the lens of career theory. She is a qualified careers guidance practitioner in addition to having qualifications in Learning and Teaching. She is a member of the Irish Institute of Guidance Counsellors and the Career Development Institute UK.

Licence

©2024 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).