Bridging the gap: inclusive practitioners in the third space and the embedding of universal design

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Abstract

This opinion piece considers the third space from an inclusive practice, disability, and accessibility services perspective, an area largely unexplored thus far in third space studies. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are becoming more responsible for accommodating an increasingly diverse student and staff population. Staff working in areas of inclusive practice are being organically drawn into the third space in a changing higher education landscape that is struggling to respond to rapidly increasing numbers, funding concerns, legislative developments, and the call for mainstreaming supports. Drawing on key research on the third space including Whitchurch (2008), McIntosh and Nutt (2022), Veles and Carter (2016), and higher education research and data from the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA), this piece establishes the current challenges for embedding inclusive practice in higher education in Ireland. The profile and role of the inclusive practitioner in the higher education setting is especially complex; they come from varied employment and educational backgrounds and operate across academic boundaries, having gleaned expansive experience and tacit knowledge of the area. Crucial for the continued development of this practitioner is the ability to use agency and changing funding streams to engage in research and collaboration to build upon their cross-campus connections and knowledge base. Using Homi Bhabha's (2004) third space theory of the hybrid subject as a site for transformation as a conceptual framework, we argue that the inclusive practitioner's hybrid, integrated, and autonomous role within the third space can bridge the gap between individual accommodations and the embedding of a whole institution approach to Universal Design.

Keywords: third space; inclusive practitioners; disability services; universal design.

Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly charged with providing more inclusive infrastructures to accommodate a growing diverse student and staff population. Staff employed in this area of promoting inclusive practice, areas including disability services and accessibility, are being naturally drawn into the third space as funding concerns, increased numbers, the mainstreaming of supports, legislation, and a need to collaborate encourage a new approach to inclusive practice across the higher education sector. However, there seems to be minimal discourse on the significance of the third space from an inclusive practice, disability, and accessibility perspective.

Third space theory as a postcolonial concept is attributed to Homi Bhabha in his 2004 *The location of culture*. While Whitchurch's higher education conceptualisation of the term has many correlations, Bhabha's framework is helpful in its relevance to power relations and the hybrid subject as 'ambivalent', defying notions of a pure originary or binary, as Whitchurch (2008) terms it, and operating beyond boundaries (Bhabha, 2004). For Bhabha, the solution to hierarchical practices and structures – in his case, colonial, in this case, institutional – lies with the in-betweenness of the third space, the locus from which disruption and then transformation can emerge (Bhabha, 2004). The core recommendation here posits that the third space practitioner operating in the in-between, cross-campus inclusive practice space solves the lacunae between the deficit model of individual accommodations and a whole institution approach to Universal Design (UD).

In Ireland, there has been a discernible increase in diversity in the student population, demonstrating the pressing need for embedding inclusive practice. The overall number of general enrolments in higher education has increased by 17.3% between the academic years 2014/15 and 2020/21 (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, 2023). Moreover, the number of disabled students has increased by 268% over 13 years, now accounting for 6.6% of the total student body. The national target for disabled students is 16% by 2028 (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, 2022; Higher Education Authority, 2022). Worryingly, this latter figure does not account for those

who fail to register with disability services or those who do not have sufficient documentation to register. This growth in numbers has not gone unnoticed, with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland publishing National Access Plans calling for approaches that focus on the mainstreaming of supports, as well as broader institutional approaches to inclusion that draw on inclusive pedagogical frameworks like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to reduce the need for individual accommodations (Higher Education Authority, 2018; 2022).

The marketisation of higher education has also become more evident than ever before, with an overemphasis on metrics and a tightening of budgets (Hall, 2022). These financial restrictions, coupled with increased numbers, impede the delivery of inclusive practices and strategic promises. While educational approaches, including UD and UDL, promise more inclusive practices, higher education is far removed from providing the support required to embed these approaches. As a result, the growing numbers are putting increased pressure on units, including the disability services, driving staff into a new space, spaces that go beyond the traditional roles into often borderless areas to ensure students' needs are met. Positionality is key; the third space practitioner exists in those interstices of academia, creating those vital apertures for change. Transformational change lies with this notion of the in-betweenness of the third space practitioner, not outside, or other, but an integral part of academia.

The inclusive practitioner

The growth of UDL in Ireland has resulted in its permeation across Irish educational policy and publications, from primary to postsecondary and into pre-service teacher education (Flood and Banks, 2021; O Shaughnessy, 2021). From an inclusive practice perspective, there is an intrinsic relationship between accessibility and UDL, where the universal element implies innate accessibility (O Shaughnessy, 2021). In recent years, the focus on accessibility in education has shifted. Legislation, including the European Union Web Accessibility Directive, transposed into Irish law in 2020, has placed an onus on how public bodies, including universities, publish content across different digital platforms (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, 2021). Making institutions subject to accessible audits, this legislation has the potential to impact accessibility and pedagogical practice across higher education (O Shaughnessy, 2021). Although one could argue that

accessibility is everyone's business, it is often left to assistive technologists, accessibility experts, and those from disability services to drive the accessibility agenda. These practitioners often have tacit knowledge to address accessibility from multiple perspectives, including teaching and learning, administration, systems, and physical perspectives. While these roles vary significantly from institution to institution, these roles can have many responsibilities, including broader approaches related to inclusive practice, research, teaching and learning, as well as human resources and EDI-based initiatives. As a result, these practitioners require a complex and comprehensive skill set to navigate this third space.

The central function of disability support services professionals is to assist Higher Education Institutions and academic staff in the facilitation of reasonable accommodations, thus inhabiting a vital role in the development of inclusive practices. The role is as such multifarious in nature and broad in its reach. A high level of professional competencies and knowledge of higher education and disability are core functions of the service (McCarthy et al., 2018), with engagement reaching widely across and beyond the institution. Disability services in a changing higher education landscape additionally provides the opportunity for the development of key processes, policy review, project management, collaboration, and research initiatives. The hybridity of the role provides invaluable latitudinal academic insight on inclusion and higher education, pointing to the immense potential of this third space professional in the drive towards inclusion in tertiary education.

As inclusion takes a more central stage across higher education, this third space skill set of the inclusive practitioner becomes crucial. For example, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) in Ireland recently launched a Universal Design charter for tertiary education called ALTITUDE (Banks et al., 2024). This national charter was designed for Higher Education Institutions to declare their intentions to make incremental and sustainable progress regarding the embedding of UD across the core of its activities. This charter divides UD in higher education into four pillars, including teaching, learning and assessment; digital environment; physical environment; and supports, services and student engagement. This charter identifies how several areas like equality, diversity, inclusion (EDI), assistive technology, and accessibility transcend all four pillars. The charter acknowledges the interconnectivity across pillars and institutional spaces, space already occupied by inclusive third space practitioners. Inclusive practitioners operating in the third space understand the interconnectivity and relationships

within the UD pillars. This knowledge of the complexities and interconnectivity held by third space professionals is beginning to be recognised, offering opportunities for inclusive practitioners to engage in new spaces.

Third space research – a collaborative approach

Veles and Carter (2016) argue that third space professionals are vital in bridging the role between teaching and research. While traditional research pathways and time may limit research opportunities for non-academic staff, HEA access-related funding initiatives in Ireland have allowed professional support staff to collaborate, manage, and deliver research projects. In recent years, the HEA have developed several short-term funding streams which allowed inclusive practitioners in professional support positions to recruit posts like post-doctoral researchers to explore areas of UD and inclusive practice. However, navigating systems tailored to support traditional research pathways can take time and effort. For example, post-doctoral researchers often must have their Principal Investigator (PI) linked to faculty; the system may not permit the PI to be situated in professional support services, regardless of qualification. Furthermore, research cost centres can differ from non-research cost centres, and non-academic staff are often unable to create research cost centres, especially if funding was received through 'non-standard' research funding pathways, which is what is sometimes happening. Unfortunately, the idea of academic and support staff collaborating on research still seems perplexing to many, including senior management, who often favour a more siloed support staff and academic dichotomy.

An explanation for this boundary around progress for the third space practitioner is the binary viewpoint of 'an academic domain, and an administrative or management domain that supports this' (Whitchurch, 2008, p.378). Academic staff come from various professional backgrounds, where an increase in precarity in academia has led to many seeking employment in academic administrative positions. Whitchurch describes the 'blended professional' (Whitchurch, 2008, p.628), with Silvey et al. adding that 'such staff often have academic credentials (MA or PhD), experience in academia or external but related sectors' (Silvey et al., 2018, p.41). Postdoctoral researchers are also increasingly inhabiting the third space; the Irish Universities Association and Technological Higher Education Association (2021) and recent policy by the Department of Further and Higher

Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2021) both encourage this proliferating cohort to develop their transferable skillset and consider seeking employment outside of traditional academic roles (Share and Loxley, 2023).

The notion of interdisciplinary action research using a practical and academic lens seems almost alien to those unfamiliar with third space working and integrated approaches in higher education environments. For example, we received funding from the HEA to recruit a post-doctoral researcher with a background in academia and as a disability practitioner. They formed part of a team comprising a PI with a senior academic in e-learning and Instructional Design and project manager who is an inclusion and accessibility specialist with over 15 years of experience in inclusive practice in higher education. This non-traditional approach provided a broad understanding and knowledge of the complexities of the research from an integrated academic and practical standpoint. This collaborative, integrated approach to research allowed the inclusive third space professional to use the research to create baselines and position the work already undertaken in the inclusive space.

What emerges from this hybrid collaboration is 'a dialectical reorganisation' where the subject constructs their identity from an in-between state (Bhabha, 2004, p.55), thus resolving the problematic notion of a fixed binary in higher education, the 'us' and 'them' perspective as discussed by Whitchurch (2008). Developing a robust research capacity is also crucial for third space professionals; besides providing academic substance, it enhances integrity, expertise, and professionalism when working in a collaborative space with academics (Veles and Carter, 2016; Denney, 2022). However, Whitchurch (2008) notes that the capacity to blur boundaries and dismantle silos in higher education can be difficult as some institutions are more boundary-driven than others. Institutional divides 'can potentially be broken down by access to professional development, an opportunity constrained by the current fiscal realities of the higher education sector' (Silvey et al., 2018, p.40). Senior management, academics, and professional support staff need to understand the benefits of collaborative research and include third space staff who understand the crossover between both worlds and how they can be mutually beneficial.

Recommendations

McIntosh and Nutt (2022) suggest that the third space is dynamic, constantly evolving and changing; it must be if it is to reflect a higher education landscape that is in constant flux. Third space practitioners must also have a profound understanding of the ecology of higher education and how it can foster and promote more interconnected practices, removing the silos that often impede progress in higher education. With growing numbers and competition for resources, conventional approaches may no longer provide institutions with the necessary resources to meet the demands of both their staff and students. The area where third space practitioners are becoming more prominent is in Universal Design, an approach which aims to support all learners, including disabled learners. Thus, inclusive practitioners and disability staff have begun to regularly exceed their boundaries as they adapt and change to meet the needs of an increasing number of students and complex situations. This organic shift has seen these practitioners evolve into third space professionals who straddle various areas, including teaching and learning, research, and other professional services. However, more needs to be done to ensure that systems that foster third space collaboration and research are supportive of staff coming from a non-academic background.

In Ireland, National Access Plans, UD, and accessibility legislation have gradually begun a revolution in higher education that seeks to adopt mainstream approaches, moving towards a third space where collaboration, broader understanding, and development of new relationships are critical. We echo the sentiment of Hall (2022) who suggests that third space practitioners should have more autonomy and agency, allowing them to deviate from a role on the periphery and engage more centrally where they can challenge the traditional notions of how universities should operate. Higher Education Institutions and leadership need to build on the lessons of the global pandemic and usher in an era where third space professionals have this agency and are a cornerstone of higher education integration, collaboration, and research. It is in this hybrid, boundaryless space where Bhabha envisages 'we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves' (2004, p.56).

Acknowledgements

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Tracy McAvinue comes from a background in academia where she researched and taught in Literary Studies, earning her PhD in 2021. Her research area has been focused on marginalised writers and the need for diversity in literary studies and higher education. Tracy has organised events such as a seminar titled 'Diversifying the Canon', an international conference titled 'Intersectional Irelands', and seminars addressing inequities and employment precarity for early career researchers in academia. She is currently working in the area of access and widening participation as Disability Support Officer and Disability Access Route to Education advisor and is involved in a number of projects developing inclusive practice in the University of Limerick. Her current research interests are in access and inclusion in higher education.

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