



Capturing the moment: facilitating learning from the margins. A photographic essay

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Abstract

The author provides a case study of third space innovation, a professional's reflection on practice, focusing on a learning developer's approach to facilitating group learning from the margins. The author defines this as facilitated learning that prioritises the experiences, voices and needs of individuals or groups who are typically underrepresented, underserved or marginalised. It is an approach that shifts focus away from mainstream or dominant perspectives to ensure that diverse viewpoints and experiences are acknowledged and included in the learning process. It signals a new direction for research into the 'facilitation process' in learning development. The author uses photographic essay methodology to explore this as part of a meta-reflective account (Rianne and Huib, 2019). The approach enables the author to punctuate critical moments of group facilitation with visual illustrations to aid analysis and reflection. The themes of interdisciplinary approaches to group work and collaborative experiences in learning development are explored. Collaboration can create opportunities for third space individuals to gain professional and personal empowerment and agency (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2023).

The author identifies vital character proponents for personal empowerment and agency by modelling compassion as a humanistic endeavour. This shows vulnerability and congruence in facilitating learning within higher education's neoliberal, neo-colonial context. It demonstrates an awareness of the oppressive forces of higher education by exercising understanding of the student experience. It encourages experiential learning as a method to develop innovation in learning development.

Keywords: third space; critical pedagogy; group work; equality, diversity and inclusion.

Figure 1. When you learn, I learn, and then we learn.



The image illustrates a shared connectedness between mutual student learners, fostering a sense of belonging and appreciation for the learning journey (Hill et al., 2023). The photo was taken at the Lounge Akademics live podcast, 'She Changes Everything' (Lounge Akademics, November 2019).

Introduction

This paper critically reflects on group facilitation, synthesising pedagogical theory using a photovoice methodology (Sutton-Brown, 2015) and visual illustrations. Research on 'third space facilitated learning' is an emerging area that generally reveals a dearth of studies on 'facilitation' within learning development. Through this paper, I seek to provide a foundation for reflecting on facilitation, encouraging experiential learning among learning developers in the third space, and stirring an appeal for interdisciplinary approaches to group-facilitated learning. Research on 'third space facilitated learning' is an emerging area that generally reveals a dearth of studies in 'facilitation' within learning development. I revisit earlier documented work to revive these approaches and apply them to learning

development, concluding with the recommendation of further research, and, as modelled in this paper, welcoming illustrative examples from learning developers to aid further 'third space' discourse.

By day, I am a project manager responsible for progression and attainment, based in an arts higher education institution, engaging in a primarily administrative role of managing people, processes and projects. My role is an extension of the academic development team. It involves managing a group of peer mentors (students as partners) who provide feedback to lecturers as part of teaching and learning to ensure parity and equitable learning experiences as part of quality assurance processes. In contrast, I also practice photography and digital content creation, and as a creative practitioner, I host live podcast events and social meetups. Here, I synthesise ideas and practices I use outside the academy as part of reflecting on group facilitation.

Contextualising the third space

Gutiérrez (2008) defines the 'third collective space' as foregrounding a process in which students reconceive who they are and what might be accomplished academically and beyond. The third space practitioner is influential in facilitating a meaningful student learning experience, illustrated in Figure 2, 'the gathering for she changes everything'. McIntosh and Nutt (2022) expand further by providing a comprehensive overview of third space discourse and the positions that practitioners occupy within the space, describing the 'third space' as a 'fluid site of continual repositioning of permanent oscillation between fluidity within and between enunciating sites including physical locations and political positionings' (2022, p.6). McIntosh and Nutt (2022) resonate with my personal and professional reflections on identity, mirroring the oscillation between my educational philosophy and practice, which also informs the professional spaces that I occupy, and this is a central theme in this paper.

I created a symposium called Lounge Akademiks and used creative ways to express learning found in multimodal learning (English, 2015). The images captured in this paper illustrate the collaboration between my role and external social educational media influencers as part of the Lounge Akademiks experience. It models group work approaches that can also aid learning in higher education. The process itself materialises

through recording audio and visuals as part of an informal group learning experience repurposed as a synchronous learning content captured in a podcast.

My commitment to taking more minor risks as part of group work exercises 'prudent, practical judgement' in facilitating student learning (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). As a learning developer, I navigate this middle ground that often only appears lucid to me and my immediate colleagues, where we are not lecturers in a specialist topic area, but assist in facilitating student learning by guiding the academic staff that teach them (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). At some points, we even act as intermediaries for academic staff, interpreting data on progression and attainment, and providing a narrative on how this translates into the student experience. Group facilitation is an allegory of the broader facilitation of learning within the higher education ecosystem (Brazant, 2023). This raises questions about the behaviours and qualities professionals need in order to facilitate learning from the margins.

Figure 2 illustrates the power of understanding the student learner's experience and needs. When listened to and understood, learning developers can facilitate attention in an unwavering and unmatched way. This live podcast event was created because of the lack of representation of black women in spaces of influence, and it recalls their time in the academy as part of articulating their learning experiences. (Lounge Akademics, 2019)

Figure 2. The gathering for She Changes Everything

The photo was taken at the Lounge Akademics live podcast 'She Changes Everything' in November 2019.

The learning developer as an authentic facilitator

As part of navigating the third space, learning developers must be aware not only of the needs of their student cohort but also their sense of wellbeing. Planning for a diverse student body means a delivery that defies the traditional conventions expected as part of academic learning and teaching (Gutiérrez, 2008). It would be negligent to consider the role of facilitator as part of student learning without acknowledging the evident interplay of social histories, relationship to gender and race, institutional agendas and power dynamics (Gutiérrez, 2008). As a learning developer, it pays dividends to display qualities of intuition, and this means facilitating a process that embodies the whole person, responding to the modern student, whose real-life needs include parenthood and juggling full-time jobs with their studies (see Figure 3, 'Being our true and authentic selves'). Facilitating change in groups has merit within the academy, applying 'praxis' as further developed by Smith (2011) is to see the role of the learning developer as 'creative, other seeking and ultimately seeks to truly and rightly further human well-being' (Smith, 2011).

Smith's (2009) notion of facilitation, mainly within a groupwork context, brings together the work of Schwarz (2002), Rogers (1967) and Kolb (1984) in promoting reflective practice as an intuitive part of facilitating learning, regardless of context. A significant point is that he sees the primary responsibility for learning as with the student first and second with the facilitator, significantly contrasting traditional educational models (Smith, 2009). Therefore, by revisiting ideas by Heron (1999), using reflective practice and experiential learning as foundational principles, this body of work provides a practical guide of qualities for facilitating group sessions as follows in the next section.

Figure 3. Being our true and authentic selves.



The photo was taken at the Lounge Akademics live podcast 'She Changes Everything' in November 2019.

Figure 3 above illustrates the 'authentic learning developer.' The image of the lead facilitators/hosts conveys humour and a 'realness' as described by Smith (2009). Using intuition and their selves as part of facilitating this group session contributes to a constructive learning experience for all. Through modelling vulnerability and taking risks in

pursuit of learning, our ambition is for our learners to be able to do the same (Lounge Akademics, 2019).

Quality 1: learning developers are reflexive facilitators

Facilitating student learning as a human endeavour requires sharing the learning developer's authority with the student (Nesari, 2015) (see Figure 4, 'We are listening' for illustration). A prerequisite to this is introspection, an internal dialogue of reflection before enabling this in others (Tsekeris, 2010). I find it helpful to name differences in the classroom; I frame differences, whether culture, race or beliefs, as strengths in co-learning. Consistent with Giddens's (Giddens and Pierson, 1998) model of reflexivity, I see diversity in our context as multi-layered; there is the apparent diversity of the student population (based on gender, ethnicity, cultural values, sexual orientation, etc.), and then, our teaching methods, student approaches and learning styles are diverse.

A significant development in my practice has been expanding my learning, knowledge, understanding and application of experiential learning, and taking this to another level. To elaborate, this has meant creating more opportunities for students to co-author learning experiences through enabling critical consciousness, particularly on issues of race and difference (Freire, 1970; Gutiérrez, 2008; Stewart and McClure, 2013). As a learning developer, I have enabled teaching staff to facilitate and even factor in issues of race and decolonisation as part of their teaching and assessment processes (Brazant, 2023). However, this does mean the learning developer is taking risks in teaching and learning, consistently being aware of their internal dialogue within a constantly changing social environment (Archer, 2003). According to Rogers and Horrocks (1996), critical reflection and questioning are vital strategies for making meaning out of experiences. This deliberation about diversity and its meaning continues this process, raising further points for consideration for teachers and learning developers and the student body they serve.

Quality 2: learning developers embrace experimentation and risk in facilitation

Emphasis should be placed on the 'human aspect' of the learning developer's role. This cross-examination is essential to understanding the student's overall learning experience. Part of this reflective learning process should utilise experiential learning to develop insight

and enquiry for both learning developers and learners. Therefore, advocating for more informal and creative approaches to learning and learning development should make for a fresh take on the overall learning experience within a higher education context, where seminal work on pedagogy often reflects a more prescriptive and transactional approach (Freire, 1970).

However, in support of traditional education models, I see facilitation as playing a role in the learning developer's experience of synthesising theory and its application to teaching, therefore adding meaning to practice. For instance, the principle of students having what Smith (2009, p.8) refers to as access to 'valid information' and having 'free and informed choice' is synonymous with more advanced debate and progressive ideas in learning development practice within higher education. However, I assert that scholarly articles on traditional learning and teaching practice, in my opinion, lack the human touch. The role of the teacher/learning developer always appears implicit within the literature, but Smith (2009) highlights one of what he describes as the core conditions of facilitated learning, in which the role of the learning developer has the potential to embody a 'realness' and 'authenticity' that sees a relationship between the learner and learning developer.

This is a development from the earlier work of Rogers (1967) and later revisited by Thorne (1992). I value this and consequently seek to apply these ideas to my practice, demonstrating a definite fluidity in applying informal learning and group practice. This is apt for the learning developer as a third space professional, who allows opportunities to exercise creativity and demonstrate a 'realness' that does not deny the 'true authentic self' as part of practice Thorne (1992, p.26). This creates, though, a dichotomy between one's true self and the dual role of carrying out bureaucratic processes of maintaining a system that is at odds with one's more egalitarian values and often imposed by institutions (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2022).

Quality 3: the learning developer facilitates learning as a human endeavour

Effective facilitation is a holistic intervention that 'alerts us to the significance of the whole person' (Heron, 1999, p2). Smith (2011) develops the argument further by eliciting that facilitating learning is a humanistic endeavour (2011, p. 3). This process links ideas of reflection, which are also generally synonymous with teaching, learning practice and

pedagogy (Smith, 2009). As learning developers, we are more familiar with the definition of group facilitation as illustrated by Schwarz (2002, p.5), in which 'the facilitator's tasks are to help the group to increase effectiveness by improving its process and structure' and thus supports a more business/ task-orientated approach to completing learning goals or tasks.

According to Smith (2009), another condition of facilitated learning, empathic understanding, is when the learning developer 'has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student' (see Figure 1, 'When you learn, I learn, and then we learn'). This notion of empathic understanding is necessary to be freed from oppressive, transactional and authoritarian views of learning. To develop Smith's line of thought further would be to acknowledge the interplay of power dynamics between the institution, the learning developer and the subsequent impact on students' engagement with learning. This 'elephant in the room' proves negatively disruptive and counterproductive to the overall teaching endeavour, especially if not tended to. More recent work advocating for compassionate approaches (Gilbert, 2017; Hill et al., 2023) in education pays credence to Smith's (2009) authentic and experiential learning approach, which sees teaching not as an isolated act that rests on the teacher, but as a collaborative exercise between learning developer, learner and the institution (Stewart and McClure (2013).

Smith's (2009) work helps frame facilitation as an intuitive exercise. It considers experiential and informal learning practices as aiding the co-creation of knowledge between the learning developer and student, and helping to make sense of and add meaning to the learning process. However, these approaches lack tangible application; hence, including images in this paper adds to developing case studies supporting this argument. Using intuition and authenticity as part of facilitation is exciting but requires further research and enquiry.

Figure 4. We are listening

The photo was taken at the Lounge Akademics live podcast 'She Changes Everything' in November 2019.

Figure 4 illustrates learning development as a human endeavour (Nesari, 2015). The image of the lead facilitators/hosts conveys attentiveness to the student learner/participant as they speak and make their point. The sharpness in the focus of the facilitators is expressed both in their facial expressions and the clarity of the image, showing an open transparency and willingness to learn from others. Our practice is in the frame here, requiring reflexivity as learning developers.

Figure 5. I am willing to take the risk in pursuit of learning.



The photo was taken at the Lounge Akademics live podcast 'She Changes Everything' in November 2019.

Figure 5 illustrates the host as being vulnerable. He is the only male as part of a predominantly women majority group event exploring themes of gender equality. He is not only willing to take risks in immersing himself in this way, as demonstrated visually through this paper, but through compassion, he is willing to understand and listen to women's experiences. Not only is he willing to decentre himself as the co-lead, but he also takes risks, immersing himself in learning. Applying this to learning development, what risks will we take to aid and facilitate others' understanding? What would it be like to sit in the room, not knowing all the answers, and sit in the uncomfortable presence of uncertainty?

Conclusion: implications for group facilitation practice in learning development.

In conclusion, the call for further discussion and debate on the emerging third space in learning development practice is timely. The desired destination for our students and a personal goal for my practice is the development of a shared learning culture that students adopt beyond an immediate classroom environment. The sometimes complex process of making meaning of things should be a shared struggle that ripples out to and is informed

by other non-conventional spaces, like 'Lounge Akademics', to continue the dialogue and protract learning. The third space professionals that contribute to facilitating the meaning-making for students outside of the classroom are often ghettoised or side-lined within the hierarchy of the academy. Using podcasts and photographic approaches to capture practice as part of learning and teaching is becoming a standard tool for students and learning developers to reflect on their knowledge and practices. These also double as document learning by providing a powerful opportunity to create safe spaces to be authentic and open, and engage in honest dialogue about learning experiences whilst documenting and preserving innovative practice (see Figure 5, 'I am willing to take the risk in pursuit of learning').

The third space also seems to be a logical space to practice and experiment with some of the qualities and approaches listed in this paper and to do so in collaboration with students and other learning developers. Facilitation in learning development requires further research and discussion. Applying group facilitation approaches to learning development presents both challenges and opportunities. I welcome the further exploration of these themes relating specifically to the development of professional identities and the qualities required to facilitate learning within a constantly changing higher education environment. It is safe to say that, with the increasingly new challenges presented by a diverse student population, learning developers will need to consistently revisit their practice and further develop a skill base that goes beyond content knowledge of a specific approach or specialism. I recommend incorporating a grounded and realistic skill base by learning developers who are cognisant of the needs of students and practice empathy and compassion.

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