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# Disrupting the third space through playfulness, mattering, and unbounded perspectives

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## *Abstract*

This paper explores the evolving landscape of higher education in the UK, emphasising the diversity of the student population and the ensuing challenges for traditional university frameworks. It is framed through the concept of 'third space' professionals – individuals who operate beyond the conventional academic and administrative divides – to address these challenges (Whitchurch, 2013). The authors use reflective narratives that are diffracted through each other to shed light on the complexity of functioning in this innovative space. Their experiences of working-class origins, transitions from other sectors, and mature student pathways, illustrate how diversity enriches their engagement with students and their contribution to the university environment. The narrative showcases how third space professionals are pivotal in enhancing student success and promoting a more inclusive and student-focused university culture. They challenge existing academic hierarchies and bureaucratic norms, fostering a more adaptable and responsive educational setting. The paper highlights four third space practitioners' creative and strategic approaches to navigating and reforming university structures whilst facing institutional resistance and systemic hurdles. Through principles of disruption, ethical practice, playfulness, and boundary-crossing, third space professionals are depicted as agents of cultural change, advocating for broader recognition and expansion of their roles in the academic ecosystem. In conclusion, the authors argue for the vital importance of the

third space in higher education innovation, where the unique backgrounds of professionals significantly impact university transformation.

**Keywords:** third space; playfulness; mattering; unbounded perspectives.

## *Introduction*

Studying at university has historically been the preserve of global elites (Matheson and Wells, 1999; Willets, 2017), though even since the early nineteenth century, education was increasingly being conceived as the right of all people to enable them to contribute to their world, and not just the privileged few. Indeed, in 1852 John Henry Newman argued that a university education should develop citizens who are self-aware and think critically in order to become good members of society. Speed forward, and the expansion of university level education perpetuated by successive UK Governments (Parkes and Beniston, 2021) is widely visible. In the academic year 2021/22, some 48.6% of English school leavers engaged in higher education (HE) by the age of 25 (Department for Education, 2023), with those over the age of 21 in 2019/20 making up 37% of the full-time undergraduate student population in the United Kingdom. Though the overall student population is getting younger and undergraduate part-time mature student numbers have fallen, evidence suggests that full-time mature student numbers are continuing to rise (Hubble and Bolton, 2021).

A lexicon has sprung up around this change: widening participation, first in family, non-traditional entry, commuter student, intersectional disadvantage. If the student body is fundamentally different because of diversifying intakes, the practices embodied in the way in which universities operate must change. But universities are hierarchical, complex organisations, grounded in ancient traditions and deeply embedded cultural practices. They have not moved quickly to embrace their ‘new’ students or meet their needs. The restructure of university funding that began under the Blair administration further compounds this tension; universities now have a pressing financial imperative to hold onto every student they recruit, but understanding the challenges students face in persisting with their studies has proved a ‘wicked’ problem. We can argue that the third space has grown up in response to this problem; new kinds of students require us to work in new ways; to span the boundaries (Williams, 2010) of what might seem disparate institutional

domains that for Mcfarlane (2011) at least, have traditionally been seen as part of the academic practice of teaching, research and service. However, for some, the emergence of roles within the third space that blur the traditional binary distinction of the academic and administrative are inextricably bound up in the neoliberal intrusion into higher education and, as such, may be seen as 'risky, threatening and dysfunctional' (Whitchurch, 2015, p.83). Conceptual resistance to the third space rationalises Veles, Carter and Boon's claim that academic attention to third space professionals is still only 'gradually creating an overall more legitimised and more identifiable space' (2019, p.77), although the principles of this idea have been present in the literature for decades (see, for example, McInnis, 1998; Dobson, 2000). In turn, perhaps in response, some professionals occupying the third space have rejected the title 'academic', even positioning themselves as anti-academic (Dashper and Fletcher, 2019). The authors of this paper do not see ourselves as anti-academic but, rather, as 'social actors' (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022, p.3) 'subverting existing practices and hierarchies' (Hawley, et al., 2019, p.2) leveraging our positionality, ever mindful that this 'may be unsettling to a conventional view of "the academy" and the roles that it contains' (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022, p.6.).

## *About the authors*

We are four colleagues who identify as third space professionals, at different stages of our careers, operating in different roles that respond to these tensions within a small, local university, as follows:

> Ian spent twenty-five years in a variety of leadership positions in the private, public, and third sectors before moving into HE in 2018 to run a partnership project with local businesses. Ian became involved in the delivery of employability-focused course content during 2019, before transitioning to a formal academic contract and leadership of the cross-curricular delivery of work-related learning and enterprise-related content in 2020.
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> Gill worked for over thirty years in the financial sector taking voluntary redundancy in 2013. She completed a Foundation Degree and Top-up Degree in Early Childhood Education and Care between 2014 and 2018 to support her volunteer role as a director of a local charity preschool. This was followed by an MA in

Education which included studying during Covid-19. During her studies at Birmingham Newman University, Gill participated avidly in Student Staff Partnerships and became a Student Writing Mentor supporting students to develop their academic writing skills. In 2022, she achieved FHEA accreditation for her support work and recently gained her PG Certificate in Higher Education Practice. She is self-employed providing Academic Support Services to two institutions.

Leoarna graduated in Law from Leeds University in 1994. She began a PhD but was unable to complete it. After careers in the third sector, and then the civil service, she returned to HE in 2014. Having moved from lecturing on Early Years and Education policy in 2018, to working cross-institutionally to enhance welcome and induction practices, and co-lead an impactful Student Staff Partnership programme, Leoarna is now also delivering initiatives focused on reducing continuation and awarding gaps.

Since graduating in 2006 as a mature parent student, Sarah has taught and supported learners across a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate courses working across a range of HE departments, alongside leading pedagogical development projects designed to enhance student experience and success. As Reader in Collaborative Pedagogies and Practice within the Faculty of Education at Birmingham Newman University, she is responsible for the Post Graduate Certificate in HE Practice and CPD route to PSF 2023 Fellowship.

Our paper thus reflects this diversity of experience, and what follows is an intra-woven discussion of the value that unusual trajectories bring into university cultures, how these shape a collaborative nature focused in on relationship-building and a sense of mattering, and the challenges we face in embarking upon this work and the sometimes ‘playful’ mechanisms by which we overcome them. We see our discussion as relevant to the diverse range of learning development roles conceptualised and operating within the sector, not least because these are ‘increasingly conceived as highly collaborative roles enacting interdisciplinarity or even transdisciplinarity’ (Quinney in Parkes, 2018, p.2). Before we delve into this discussion, let us first set out how we explored our experiences.

## *Our approach to thinking-with the 'third space'*

Inspired by the work of Barad (2007) following Donna Haraway (1997), the structure of the paper plays with 'diffraction': a process of weaving four short 500-word reflective statements through each other. We call this 'diffraction' as we experiment with mapping our routes of understanding the third space to create a collaborative cartography that is not only 'representational' (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2017, p.119), but offers a deeper understanding of the effects these have shaped. In this way, one could read our paper as a collaborative auto-ethnographic account in that it immerses us and the reader in our personal experience (Park, 2014; Bochner 2017) to explore situated, specific and unique cases. We weave our personal experiences through each other, to co-create new insights, rather than merely creating a 'memoir' (Merriam and Grenier, 2019, p.162). The following paper does not strive for objectivity and generalisability in a traditional 'scientific' way, but rather asserts integrity and rigour through being accountable, honest, transparent, and trustworthy, operating with care and respect of all those involved (Universities UK, 2019). As authors, we are a purposive sample, deemed 'knowledgeable people' (Ball in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.157) who work and/or study in roles seen as crossing departmental or discipline boundaries, integrating practice from across different areas of our institution. We openly acknowledge that we are 'insiders' in this regard, with our collective and diffractive auto-ethnography taking place within our own context, being inseparable from the world within which it exists (Trochim, 2006).

## *The process*

To co-create and diffract our collective auto-ethnography, we each crafted our 500-word accounts, based on our own current thinking about our practice, our collaborative ventures, and/or the nature of being and becoming in the third space. We then came back together in two three-hour workshops to identify convergence and divergence in our experience(s) and understanding, as understood through these accounts. In the first workshop, we read each other's texts and discussed the different ways in which we had conceptualised the spaces that we work within. From this, we decided to look out for where each spoke to or could see connections to ideas about the reproduction of knowledge and culture, playfulness, ethics, and our non-traditional journeys. This was based on what resonated with us as we connected with and across each text, after which

we then took it in turns to craft a narrative about where these 'sat'. The result is an 'affirmative, detailed, and care-full' diffraction of each other's texts, rather than explicit critique (Bozalek, 2017, p.47) that has the potential to 'do' epistemological damage through a process of distancing, othering, and putting others down (Barad in Bozalek, 2017, p.46). By playing with 'diffractive reading', we set out to weave our insights through each other whereby our reworked vignettes are not seen as a (re)awakening of a past to be found, but a creative and impressionistic remembering of connections that 'mix, match, mingle, and multiply' as 'nomadic' (Braidotti, 2010, p.362) praxis. We note that our being and becoming third space practitioners from non-traditional routes ourselves is to our benefit when working in open, fluid spaces with peers and students with different knowledges. Here, we can hold tensions together that both embodies a 'playfulness' in developing and sustaining creative and motivational practices, whilst also attending to cultural norms that see our students and staff flourish.

We now turn to exploring the themes that emerged in discussion from our collected vignettes to consider: 'why we are good at third space work' due to our unusual trajectories into HE; subsequently reflect on 'what we do within the third space' through collaborating, relationship building, and making people feel like they matter; and finally suggest some of the 'challenges to third space working' and reflect on 'how we overcome these through playfulness, mattering and unbounded perspectives'.

## *Why we are good at third space work: unusual trajectories into HE*

Our non-traditional routes into higher education, either because of our working-class heritage, mature student status, or complex prior educational biographies, bring with them different perspectives and skill sets. Our diffractive readings thus enabled a viewing of these that precisely positions these experiences as preparation to be comfortable in the third space.

> Leoarna: My school headmaster told me 'People like us don't go to places like that' when I indicated my desire to attend a red brick university. I proved him wrong. I had early ambitions to work as an academic and began working in social research immediately after graduating. But my working-class heritage meant that imposter syndrome and negative experiences hindered my path. In

my 40s I returned to the sector, finally able to see that my experiences were what made me suitable to ably support the student journey.

Sarah: I have talked elsewhere (Mathias and Parkes, 2021) about how I have come to work in what Whitchurch (2013) calls the third space via a 'non-traditional' route. This plotted the trajectory of a working-class, first-generation student-parent whom in their mid-twenties, went to university to become a post-16 teacher of English Literature following a successful career in retail. During my studies, I volunteered to mentor school children who were deemed 'bright', to raise their aspirations as part of the Welsh Reaching Wider initiative. I subsequently was employed as a student ambassador and then Widening Access Officer, officially working with those deemed 'disadvantaged' to support them in thinking that university could be a destination for them. This led to working with students once they successfully entered university, teaching, supporting, and developing activities that facilitated their success. Such varied experiences have always felt as if I existed in an interstitial or liminal space that engenders a process of meaning-making to generate 'new ways of being, working and learning' (Solomon, Boud and Rooney, 2006, p.6). Third space working then should not concern the development of mechanisms to deliver wholesale static and fixed norms, but to recognise the processes of their construction to affect a collective and affirmative agency that transforms them into something new (Braidotti, 2013).

Ian: My origin story is the day that, as a twelve-year-old boy, I told my school's career advisor that I wanted to become a doctor. I say career advisor, but it was a Biology teacher reluctantly guiding pupils to make their subject choices. I don't know what her motivation was for what followed; perhaps she just didn't want the class clown in her Biology classes for two more years, but the sentence she said changed my life: 'No child from this school will ever become a doctor'. I selected unrelated subjects and underperformed in them. I stumbled on through the education system, talented but a-motivated and directionless, until I found myself working in financial services because that's where a-motivated and directionless people found themselves in the 1990s.

In the hyper-capitalist environment of corporate banking, I became pugnacious. I was surrounded by people with good degrees from redbrick universities who had family connections, the correct accent, and all manner of other natural and systemic advantages. I worked countless unpaid hours, ingratiated myself with the right people, and cheerfully completed tasks that more senior colleagues found unpleasant. A decade later, after running a charity to salve my conscience, I found a role working in a university as a Project Manager. This role evolved into an ostensibly academic role, but – as a lecturer in enterprise and employability – one which is very firmly rooted in professional practice.

When students know that their lecturer also struggled at school, didn't know anyone who could explain how a university works, is neurodiverse, and has a complex home life, it shows them that they aren't alone in experiencing such barriers; it shows students that they too belong in a university and that they matter.

Gill: Working in the financial sector in my mid-20s, I decided to study accountancy and disappointingly achieved a marginal fail, a fail, and a bad fail - who knew there were so many ways to fail! This deflated my ambition to study until I finally took voluntary redundancy after 30 years' service and embarked on my higher education journey. However, when starting my degree, I did not expect to complete it or do well at the degree considering my previous attempt at studying. As a mature student-parent and the first in my family to attend university, my social capital as a student was non-existent. However, I recognised my agency to change this, so I became a student ambassador and volunteered as a peer mentor; these activities both provided a platform to build relationships with third space professionals and helped nurture my sense of belonging (Tinto, 2017; Ahn and Davis, 2019). This sense of belonging led to a more positive educational experience this time round and highlighted how I could make a difference as a third space professional to help other non-traditional students succeed.

Our sense of values, and our ability to empathise with the diverse student base now more typical of universities, that is embodied within our narratives, informs our ethics and motivations for working in the third space. What were seen as weaknesses in the twentieth

century's 'elitist' system become our strengths in a new era of university study. Operating in liminal, interstitial spaces feels comfortable to us, and we feel a solidarity with the students we work with. We have felt our lack of social capital as they feel theirs and overcome it; this gives an authenticity in encouraging our students to do the same. As Ian states, 'I get to work with widening participation students who relate to me and want to learn with me'.

## *What we do: collaborations, relationship building and mattering*

Our reflections were frequently imbued with a sense of collaboration, relationship building, and making people feel they matter, to form the vital part of working with others in unbounded and anti-hierarchical ways. For some, this was about working with like-minded others whilst working as a third space-er or involved seeking out and working with difference.

> Leoarna: My third space role affords me the privilege of facilitating students' successful navigation of their studies, so that they can go out into the world and have their own impact upon others also experiencing disadvantage. I have come to care less what my title is or the type of contract I am operating on; I work to ensure students and colleagues know that they matter, as that is what matters to me (Gravett, Taylor and Fairchild, 2021).

> Ian: You find security and solace among the like-minded. I formed strong friendships with other third space professionals and relied on my chippy pugnaciousness to publish good work and gain numerous accreditations, mostly to disarm my critics in the traditional academic space.

> Gill: Observing the significance of third space professionals in student engagement sparked my interest in continuing to build relationships and create visible and safe dialogical spaces through collaborations between third space professionals, academics, and students (Thomas, 2012). For many non-traditional students, with similar experiences to myself, the relationship built with third space professionals offers a network of support that may be missing from their life outside the institution: providing reassurance, guidance, building perseverance and making them feel like

they matter (Gravett, Taylor and Fairchild, 2021). Furthermore, my third space role of a writing mentor (Andrews and Clark, 2011) relies heavily on relational pedagogy (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004) to provide students with a neutral meaningful relationship outside of their course. This relationship creates a space for students to speak openly about how they feel regarding their studies, demonstrating the importance of acknowledging both students' cognitive and affective domains (Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia, 1964). My feedback on their academic writing may only include small tweaks; however, these small micro-adjustments accumulate, increasing students' knowledge of academic writing and making a significant difference in their confidence levels. As a recent student, I am acquainted with the multitude of anxieties studying creates and often cross the boundary of writing mentor role and become a student's critical friend, providing support to help them complete their studies.

Sarah: I see my work as 'nomadic praxis', borne from Delueze and Guttari's idea of 'nomadology' that Fox and Alldred describe as an openness to multiple worlds views that produces a 'freedom, experimentation and becoming' and assists in challenging power and identity (2017, p.18). Braidotti says that nomadic thought or ethics requires an overlap between the 'physical, the symbolic, and the sociological' (2012, pp.33-34) that disrupts universal truths to recognise heterogeneity. In nomadic praxis, we should be concerned with '...a philosophy of becoming which is situational: embedded and embodied within a specific location' (van Heerden, 2016) to undo the privileging of some knowledges over others. This requires an acknowledgement of the multiple micropolitical modes of daily activities of all that is accompanied with an affirmative compassion; one that positions the affectivity occurring between all as the activation of agency (Braidotti, 2010, pp.209-211).

Wherever we are working within the university, we are all aware of collaboration being the primary route through which 'good work' within and between students and colleagues is happening. As Leoarna observes, we are tasked with facilitating the student journey, beyond discipline silos; we show them behind the veil, smooth out the path, act as GPS so that students can navigate the complexity of higher education study more successfully. Achieving our own academic success has been a holistic endeavour, not simply intellectual but emotional and psychological; negative self-belief has been overcome in

each of us. We know this is also how it is for our students, and they therefore feel our recognition of their context and are lifted up by it.

## *Challenges to third space working*

There are, of course, challenges to supporting students and working in third spaces with colleagues who might be suspicious of our motivations or understandings. Sometimes these are grounded within perceived hierarchies or prejudices, particularly focused on the neoliberal and regulatory creep that is in part characterising English HE as we write.

> Leoarna: My role, Senior Lecturer for Student Engagement, was created in response to the Office for Students' new Access and Participation Plan expectations in 2020, and can, therefore, position me as part of the machinery of the evermore performative culture of HE (McFarlane, 2011). I have to work to persuade colleagues of the moral and ethical motivations that drive me to ensure students are given the opportunity to flourish.
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> Ian: For a long time, my presence was derided or undermined by some colleagues who viewed themselves as proper academics. Once, I learned, after I had spoken about an extra-curricular offer to a group of students, the academic whose lecture I had joined told them, 'You should ignore everything that guy said'. Some colleagues hated the neoliberal employability guy. Academia is for proper academics, not upstarts who think just anyone can do it.
>
> At other times, the overwhelming complexity of the institution, and the inter-relating of its many parts, are the cause.
>
> Leoarna: I see the postcode lottery of student experience close-up, holding multiple and often dissonant views of the university; I see the frustration of a single student with progress-hindering bureaucracy; the limited capacities of colleagues delivering multiple programmes as they are asked to always do more with less; systems that do not 'speak' to each other slowing the machinery; the strain and worry for senior leadership as we operate in constrained times. And beyond this, the imposition of

ever more demanding regulatory imperatives that can create an artificial binary of those who are seen as ‘for’ or ‘against’ the system we are operating within.

Sarah: Systems and processes within universities are probably the most challenging thing I have experienced across my career to date, whether that be in my work supporting students and/or staff, or working on projects where infuriatingly systems don’t talk to each other.

Gill: My unbounded role, as a casual part-time third space professional and a student, enables me to observe when processes are not working as well as intended. My insight offers the institution valuable constructive feedback on the coherence of institutional procedures, helping to ‘join the dots’ (Campbell-Perry, 2022).

Here, then, we acknowledge the multifaceted challenges of third space working. Sometimes resisted by colleagues by virtue of inaccurate perceptions of our work, as we occupy roles that are sometimes brought into existence by the neoliberal pressures on our institutions. But though our diffractions here represent the oft-felt challenges, we see how our practice works to navigate or circumnavigate the challenges of regulation, institutional practices, or culture to ensure our work with students had meaning, often working in ‘interstitial’ spaces (Sutton, 2015, p.44) or being playful to achieve this. Holflod (2023) notes scholars recognise that playfulness can prompt joyful and open-ended learning processes that create spaces for developing and sustaining creative and motivational practices.

## *How we overcome the challenges through playfulness*

Our discussions of our reflections illuminated that we are, each of us, working with established practices whilst concurrently challenging them (Parkes, 2018; Whitchurch, 2013, p.86). This process of weaving and discussing them has exposed modes of becoming that are playful in demeanour and destabilise any possible neoliberal threats. In this way, we explicitly see how ‘playfulness’ can be harnessed in the ways relationships are co-constructed, to the benefit of all those involved.

This requires a specific mentality and way of working to overcome some of the perceptions associated with our roles in the third space (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022, p.6).

Sarah: Being drawn to playfulness through the idea of nomadic ethics chimes with Jane Bennett's (2001) discussion of bureaucratic enchantment. This seeks to recognise the ways in which the 'immobile and idiotic labyrinth' of institutions produces an uncanny, 'alluring confusion' within humans, provoking both painful and pleasurable affects (Bennett, 2001, p.105). Institutional bureaucracy as enchantment then is depicted as an uncanny duo of both 'maddening and attractive' experiences that can yet foster joy. For me, to recognise bureaucratic enchantment within the work I do reflects ways to joyfully embrace a thinking-being-doing in the world that offers relief from the continual and sometimes overwhelming criticality we experience through disenchantment tales (Bennett, 2001, pp.56-90).

In transdisciplinary practice then, such 'playing' with different ways of being, doing, and thinking, helps us produce different knowledge '…and produce knowledge differently' (St. Pierre, 1997, p.175). Indeed, in being playful, we occupy an open, ludic, and experimental space for boundary-crossing (Holflod, 2023. p.473) to disrupt disciplinary norms and values that often generate '…the illusion that knowledge is coherent, absolute and unquestionable' (Taylor, 2021, p.30).

Leoarna: I have explored elsewhere the idea that I am operating as a 'street-level' practitioner (Lipsky, 2010; Mathias and Parkes, 2021), and that while economic, political, and regulatory forces inevitably do shape my work, I always have a choice about how I do what I do with students. Street-level practice is ultimately about the ethics I bring to my work, part of which is to positively disrupt the 'institutional assumptions' that are hindering student progress (Akerman, 2022, p.96), challenging them and working to dismantle them. My motivation for being a positive disruptor (Akerman, 2022) is ultimately grounded in my own experience of feeling held outside the academy, as so many students continue to feel today.

Ian: Coming from a non-academic background meant that I didn't know how to do traditional lectures. Only now do I realise how liberating that has been. My pedagogy is interactive, light-hearted, dynamic and communal, having more in common with YouTube creators than conventional learning facilitators.

> Gill: Building relationships with students in an anti-hierarchal and informal way enhances my understanding of what it is like ‘to be a student’ at my institution; this hopefully makes my position more valuable to the institution to offer more meaningful, friendly and playful ways to build an engaging student environment.

Our approaches show the variety of ways in which we affirmatively resist the neoliberal, either through relationships, through disruption, through ethics and/or playfulness. In his reflections, Ian observed that ‘In comics, every superhero and supervillain have an origin story, a catalysing incident directly responsible for their narrative …. I’d become the supervillain’ by virtue of working in a large banking corporation. Entering academia gave him the route out, the possibility of return to his own ethics. We each of us overcome the ‘alluring confusion’ of the neoliberal era through light-hearted-ness, through consciously anti-hierarchical practice, through positive disruption and by resisting disenchantment.

## *Conclusion*

Through our diffracted reflections we have endeavoured to indicate how we each experience boundary-crossing, finding ourselves even boundary-less. People in third space roles – whether that be as lecturer, advisor, tutor, coach, trainer or mentor (Briggs, 2018) are in a unique position through the ways in which they span the range of boundaries (Williams, 2010) existing across the differing domains of activities within the institutional setting. We note how we have each felt alienated either from, or within, higher education at some point in our lives, but now see that alienation as the reason why we are able to ‘playfully’ embrace the opportunities afforded by third space working. This inspires us to bring our experiences to the fore in our work with students and colleagues. Gravett, Taylor and Fairchild assert that pedagogies of mattering ‘...enable us to notice and consider the impact of a broader range of actors upon learning and teaching, and to tune into the objects, bodies and spaces that constitute the material mattering of learning and teaching as an in-situ practice of relationality’ (2021, pp.6-9). Our positions in the third space thus give each of us a freedom to build relationships, demonstrating to students and colleagues that they matter.

University study, and the support of those doing it, is no simple matter of inputs that equal an output. Definitions of educational success are unique, multifactorial, contradictory even,

and resistant to being reduced to a simple equation. The work to be done in the third space, in this era of record attendance at English universities and remarkable student body diversity, can never be completed. Embracing this unfinishedness while the sector undergoes problem, after threat, after challenge, requires third space practitioners to flex to a multiplicity of need while keeping one eye on the horizon at all times. As we have explored our collective experiences here, we have hoped to shed light on the values, motivations and strategies we share that enable us to persist in working for transformation in the lives of the students we serve.

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