Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education ISSN: 1759-667X
Special Issue 33: Third Space in HE January 2025

On third space and critical paralysis: the case for a pragmatic conception of third space to advance learning development in higher education

Steven White
University of Southampton, UK

Abstract

The concept of ‘third space’ in HE identifies an emerging area of work and consequent development of roles and practices which exist ‘in-between' academic and professional departments of universities (Whitchurch, 2013). Third space roles and practices can shape, challenge and extend what were previously considered well-defined boundaries in and around HE. As evidenced by the 21 distinct mentions of third space in *How to be a Learning Developer* (Syska and Buckley, 2024) and its place in the ALDinHE Manifesto (2023), awareness of third space is widespread in our field. In this theoretical analysis, I briefly sketch the origins of Whitchurch’s concept of third space in higher education in broader critical theory perspectives on the social world. This intellectual heritage, often articulated through social justice approaches to learning development (LD), has informed nuanced analyses of problems and tensions in HE institutions. However, inspired (in a bad way) by ‘mystical Marxist’ Soja’s ‘startlingly arcane’ definition of Thirdspace, I argue that aspects of critical theory or critical social justice orientations to LD can lead to contradictions or even paralysis in attempts to actually use the considerable empirical insights provided by Whitchurch, and the metaphor of third space more broadly, to inform practice. I highlight a more pragmatic approach to using the third space concept. This approach involves applying Whitchurch’s practically applicable ideas of ‘four dimensions of blended professional activity’, and three ‘phases of third space processes’. These ideas are exemplified in some aspects of LD research but are rarely elaborated on for use.

Keywords: third space; critical theory; social justice; learning development.

Introduction

The idea of a third space between professional and academic roles has been influential in higher education (HE) since Whitchurch published her seminal paper on ‘Shifting identities and blurring boundaries’ in 2008. Third space research represents a rich history of conceptual thinking which falls under the broad umbrella of critical theory, but Whitchurch’s work is also based on extensive empirical research across a number of HE contexts. Researchers in learning development (LD) have attempted to apply insights from this body of third space work in the form of a social justice approach to LD, but I argue that some aspects of Whitchurch’s work are under-represented in the literature. This theoretical analysis identifies some of the tensions and possible contradictions which arise in social justice research into the third space in education and LD specifically. As a way forward, the paper proposes Whitchurch’s empirically grounded concepts of the four dimensions of blended professional work and three phases of third space activity as practical heuristics to assist LD work in HE.

Third space, critical theory and social justice in learning development

As brief context for readers unfamiliar with the idea of third space in HE, Whitchurch’s fundamental insight as relevant to this paper was to identify ‘the emergence of broadly based, extended projects across the university, which are no longer containable within firm boundaries, and have created new portfolios of activity’ (Whitchurch, 2012, p.25). As such, a range of jobs have been created within universities which do not easily fit into specific categories or the conventional binary division between academic and professional roles in higher education. Whitchurch identifies a range of functions in this increasingly complex HE environment (bounded, cross-boundary, unbounded, blended). She initially categorises ‘learning support’ as a ‘blended professional’ role (Whitchurch, 2008, p.384), and later identifies ‘Learning development’ specifically as an official member of the blended professional club (Whitchurch, 2018, p.13). Blended professionals are defined as those ‘recruited to dedicated appointments that spanned both professional and academic domains’ (Whitchurch, 2009, p.408).

Initially, this research was based on a substantial body of empirical qualitative work. This includes interviews with 61 respondents from UK, US and Australian universities

(Whitchurch, 2008), and a survey of a further 213 novel respondents in different UK institutions (Whitchurch, 2010).

From this empirically grounded basis, Whitchurch theorises her findings using ideas of third space which can broadly be grouped under the labels of critical theory (Celikates and Flynn, 2023) or critical perspectives, as outlined in the journal *Teaching in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives* (Ajjawi et al., 2022). She frequently cites Bhabha, who explores how cultures intersect in a space of 'in-betweenness and hybridity' (Bhandari, 2022, p.172). She also draws on the work of Soja, who applied the idea of third space using an urbanist perspective, bringing together 'radical postmodernism' and human geography to explore how 'modern society has created a world of dichotomies' (Bloch and Brasdefer, 2023, p.238). Broadly, critical theory orientations such as those above will be treated in this paper as those which attempt to 'highlight the hidden assumptions which underlie dominant social practices' (McArthur, 2016, p.973). They emphasise a concern with justice for those seen as marginalised in a world of contingency where 'none of this has to be the way it is, but in this particular context, these are the norms of engagement' (Dhillon, 2024, p.111).

Whitchurch's conception of third space then, uses a layer of critical theory to help make sense of a substantial empirical investigation of roles and practices in higher education. The concept of third space, including the work of Bhabha and Soja, has influenced much creative and innovative thinking in LD (Johnson, 2018; Abegglen et al., 2019; Webster, 2022; Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2024). Such critical approaches also broadly align with articulations of LD as 'an emancipatory approach rooted in social justice' (Webster, 2022, p.181). This social justice orientation to LD involves 'working in partnership with students, in pursuit of their academic emancipation' whilst recognising the importance of power, marginalisation, identity and the value-laden nature of knowledge (Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2024, p.16). This critical social justice orientation is frequently deemed an important element of LD practice (Asher, 2024; Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2024) and aligns with commitments in the ALDinHE Values and Manifesto (2023).

This critical perspective on roles and institutional dynamics in higher education has enriched thinking across a range of third space contexts and produced some sophisticated

analyses (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). However, the following section will explore how tensions and contradictions can emerge in their application. Terms such as critical theory and social justice can be used ‘nebulously’ and ‘broadly’ (McArthur, 2016, p.968) and even proponents of social justice resist ‘tying it to a precise definition’ (McArthur, 2023, p.9). In this paper, I will attempt to follow the uses cited above as employed by those authors.

Critical theory and paralysis: space for reflection

Recent work in LD has drawn on the critical theoretical understanding of third space, using Soja’s description of Thirdspace as a place where:

> everything comes together . . . subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history (Soja, 1996, p.56-7).

This description seems extremely expansive, and as a pragmatist by inclination, I struggle to imagine what exactly is not contained in a space which can comfortably enfold both ‘everyday life and *unending history*’ [my italics]. Contemporary reviewers of Soja’s work were also concerned with this concept, asking ‘how can anybody act in a space that defies any definitional or locational anchoring?’ (Merrifield, 1999, p.348). This is a serious problem for learning developers wanting to operate in Soja’s Thirdspace. Even Soja’s fellow critical theorists found this idea difficult to work with: **‘**By pouring the world and all of its difference into a single iridescent sphere, Thirdspace […] ultimately paralyzes its beholder’ (Price, 1999, p.344).

This idea of paralysis connects to the idea of the learning development third space as one characterised by marginalisation. It is, of course, true that LD can feel that way (Dhillon, 2024, p.113), especially where lack of recognition from other university stakeholders is common (Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2024, p.156). But Whitchurch has documented how our third space position offers insights into a more complex picture in which ‘both academic and professional staff may see the other as dominant and themselves as marginalized’ (Whitchurch, 2012, p.24).

In such a context, adopting a social justice lens on issues of marginalisation and fairness which tends towards understanding other perspectives as 'hegemonic voices' (Hilson, 2017, cited Johnson, 2018, p.9) risks introducing an element of confirmation bias in our thinking. This is especially the case given the human tendency for most, but not all, people (LaFollette and Woodruff, 2015, p.457) to make moral judgements based on intuition, then use their intellect to reason toward a justification for that intuition (Haidt, 2012). In contrast to a framing of marginalisation of LD, Hood's focus invokes our agency as learning developers in the third space to 'take some benefit in being "outsiders"' by attempting to actively 'carve out' (2024, p.201) our intended outcomes in a malleable third space context. Summarising substantial empirical evidence from the field (Whitchurch, 2009), and a wide-ranging literature review across five countries (Schneijderberg and Merkator, 2013), Smith et al., highlight the possibilities of working in third space:

> third space professionals have emerged as leaders and key contributors to their institutions not only in traditional domains like student services and community engagement, but also in teaching and learning, research management, and strategic initiatives which were previously the sole domains of academics (Smith et al., 2021, p.506).

This evidence suggests that achieving substantial change for LD provision in institutional third spaces is a realistic goal, and that a focus on the marginalisation of LD itself may be overly pessimistic. The suggestion that critical or social justice education perspectives are inherently pessimistic is one recognised if not accepted by social justice advocates (McArthur, 2016, p.979). Others characterise critical perspectives more broadly as limiting or essentialising (Neiman, 2023). Philosopher Susan Nieman, for example, feels that social justice approaches tend to focus on power to the exclusion of other legitimate considerations, in a way which 'begins with concern for marginalized persons, and ends by reducing each to the prism of their marginalization' (Neiman, 2023, p.5). Regardless of whether one accepts these criticisms of critical perspectives as pessimistic or limiting, simply initiating change in the third space does not in itself necessarily constitute or guarantee a positive outcome. This caveat raises the question of how we can create, identify and evaluate positive change from a critical perspective.

Creating a critical third space: is neutrality an option after all?

Social justice approaches focus on questions of power, marginalisation and identity, treating knowledge as value-laden and contingent. This perspective aligns with the tenets of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998), which many see as an essential component of LD. It is therefore difficult to reconcile this politically engaged approach with a vision of third space LD activity which grants learning developers the ability to occupy and even 'open up a neutral, liminal space within and beyond the curriculum' (Webster, 2022; Webster, 2024, p.231). This idea of neutrality is implied in depictions of LD as an activity which 'stands apart from […] gatekeeping' functions such as marking (Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2024, p.19), and is characterised by 'non-judgemental […] values' (Webster, 2024, p.231). Conflicting directly with this vision of third space LD neutrality, the ALDinHE Manifesto itself specifically states that in LD, 'neutrality is not an option' (ALDinHE, 2023). Further, examples of LD research and practice which locates itself in third spaces explicitly recognises that these are 'socio-political spaces' (Abegglen et al., 2019, p.13). Leveraging the idea of immanent critique from critical theory, Dhillon further problematises ideas of neutrality, emphasising that: 'we cannot claim a holier-than-thou Archimedean standpoint from where we are supposedly exempt from the critiques against the ills of the neoliberal university' (Dhillon, 2024, p.111).

It is important to note that the related idea of leveraging third space concepts of 'insiders', 'outsiders' (Johnson, 2018, p.9; Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2024, p.21) and 'intermediaries' (Webster, 2022, p.185) to enrich learning developer and student interactions seems a very valuable insight. However, any implication that neutrality can simply be switched on or off in a particular educational context, even if it is a third space of a one-to-one interaction with a student, seems implausible if we are to apply a critical theory lens consistently.

In addition to theories of neutral third spaces, accounts of learning developer experiences in the third space also challenge the plausibility of claims to neutrality in our perceptions of others in HE. In exploring hybrid LD roles in HE, Grayson and Syska describe those who 'combine their role [in LD] with another related role within the orbit of HE' (Grayson and Syska, 2024, p.45). This necessarily involves movement across institutional boundaries and gives those working in hybrid roles a way to 'understand complex learning contexts better and to see students' worlds more holistically' (2024, p.47). This is illustrated in an

interview with Sunny Dhillon, an ex-learning developer turned academic, who highlights the contrasting character of his interactions with students. The conversation explores how at times, learning developers can be idealised by students 'as a kind of "messiah"', whereas his interactions as an academic elicit far less positive reactions ('frostiness') from students when he sets challenging tasks (Dhillon, 2022). Other researchers have similarly explored how those in hybrid roles come to question the ways we might best help our students to learn, for example in using a less idealised notion of the learning process (White, 2023).

Given that social justice viewpoints privilege considerations of standpoint, identity and context, insights from these hybrid roles could enrich third space thinking in LD. Indeed, Grayson and Syska claim that 'indisputable benefits' flow from the 'in-betweenness' of hybrid roles, including highlighting how 'Learning Developers may tend to idealise students and see only "their side" of issues' (Grayson and Syska, 2024, p.47). This observation highlights the power of the third space metaphor from a different perspective than many LD-based studies. It uses 'outsider/insider'-ness to 'take us out of our silos' (2024, p.47), encouraging critical self-reflection on the ALDinHE maxim that 'neutrality is not an option' in how we see other stakeholders in the institution.

A critical or social justice orientation, being as value-laden and ideological as any other, will activate strong biases and moral intuitions on these educational issues about which we feel strongly. For most people and most judgements (LaFollette and Woodruff, 2015, p.457), these intuitions will be the prime driver, or 'move the elephant' of our LD-oriented thinking, while our power of reasoning (the reasoning 'rider') tries to come up with justifications for why we are correct (Haidt, 2012). It is important to seriously consider how this might affect our interpretations of key aspects of LD and how this influences the way we understand our students and colleagues.

The following example is presented as a possible illustration of such bias. A study published in the explicitly critical-theory-oriented journal, *Teaching in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives* (Ajjawi et al., 2022), makes a claim about the highly LD-relevant issue of causes of plagiarism. However, the claim is not supported (in fact is contradicted) by the evidence the study presents. Writing on plagiarism and academic integrity, Kramm

and McKenna claim to demonstrate that 'the police-catch-punish approach [to academic integrity] fails to address the core issues of why students commit plagiarism' (Kramm and McKenna, 2023, p.2175). However, of the two studies Kramm and McKenna directly present as evidence for this claim, one is an empirical study by Selemani et al.(2018), who find that 84.9% of students self-report 'laziness and poor time management' as a reason for their plagiarism (Selemani et al., 2018, p.1). Kramm and McKenna do not describe, problematise or challenge this finding in their own article – they simply cite it as evidence for their claim. Kramm and McKenna do not define the 'transformative relationship to knowledge' which they see as a way to address the problem of plagiarism (2023, p.2175). However, even if plagiarism is 'emerging at least in part from the commodification of knowledge' (McKenna, 2022) as is alleged, it is hard to argue that such neoliberal forces pre-date 'laziness and poor time-management'. The above examples illustrate the limitations of seeing third space as neutral, and of the biases which critical approaches, like any other, can bring with them.

Can notions create motion? Paraphrasing principles and practices

Critical and social justice framings of LD entail an imperative to question, probe and problematise, and, as such, their philosophical core has been interpreted as lacking a positive vision or guidance for action, as reported (and disputed) by Dhillon (2024, p.110). The epistemology underlying social justice approaches is deeply sceptical of making universal or objective claims to truth which are divorced from context (McArthur, 2023). As a result, producing a 'prescriptive list of practices or even of set base principles' (McArthur, 2016, p.968) is rendered problematic. McArthur is referring here to social justice in assessment, a core focus of LD work. Assessment is, according to Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, a space in which learning developers can leverage their third space 'insider'/'outsider' status and avoid 'gatekeeping' (2024, p.19). But can these ideas guide learning developers in the absence of recommendations for practice or base principles?

Referring specifically to McArthur's warning against using practices and principles, Hanesworth et al. propose 'a flexible and adaptive schema of practice' (2019, p.101) to advance 'socially just assessment praxis' in universities. This description of a 'schema' seems uncannily like a paraphrase of the practices and principles they initially sought to

avoid. What is more, the article later incorporates ‘three principles of curriculum design’ (p.102) into their proposed approach. Despite aiming to foster inclusivity, this surely constitutes exactly a ‘prescriptive list of practices’ and, as such, should surely be excluded from consideration. They later state that ‘as of yet, it is unclear as to how such a novel theoretical perspective might be realised’ (p.102) in relation to a complex policy/institutional context, but this statement captures well an underlying problem with the application of social justice approaches. McArthur rejects accusations of pessimism relating to social justice approaches (2016, p.979), and suggests as a way forward ‘a notion that can deal with, and embrace, variation’, but the output is a series of further questions which create ‘heuristic spaces’ (McArthur, 2016, p.968-969), which, by implication, will (say it quietly) guide practice. This raises the further issue of how the answers to such questions can be evaluated.

Working from the suggested basis that it is ‘notions’ and questions, not principles or sets of practices that should guide our actions for social justice in an LD third space, it is important to consider how we might know whether we have answered these questions. As mentioned at the outset, Soja provides an interesting checkpoint for third space activities – are we in a space of ‘everyday life and unending history’ (Soja, 1996, p.56-7)? We must be careful to critically reflect on contingency and context, but it is safe to say the answer is probably ‘yes’. A more fine-grained concept, emancipation, is frequently cited as an aim for social justice approaches to LD (Webster, 2024, p.16; Webster, 2022; Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2024), but the critical theorists have already been there and problematised that in relation to education (Biesta, 2017, p.59), with ‘trickster’ learning developers reinforcing the critique in relation to the often marginalised field of LD (Dhillon, 2024, p.114). Just when you thought you were emancipating like the wind, you find that such ideas are ‘reifying and paradoxically limiting conceptions’ (2024, p.115). As a fundamental baseline, the critical theorist, Horkheimer, stipulates a rare universal claim: we should strive to attain ‘reasonable conditions for life’ for all (cited in Dhillon, 2024, p.110). This may seem like a foundation from which to work, but Adorno rejects as instrumentalist exactly the ‘measurements and metrics’ which would allow critical theorists, hoist with their own critical petard, to check whether such conditions have been met (cited Dhillon, 2024, p.110). Work on critical theory seems to suggest that we will know when we

have attained our emancipatory goals when we get there (How, 2003), but this claim itself seems ripe for further problematisation.

In this highly problematised analytical context, it is useful to consider what options we have to guide our practice. Potentially relevant are some specific outputs of Whitchurch's empirically grounded analyses of HE roles and practices, which may constitute 'notion[s] that can deal with, and embrace, variation' (McArthur, 2016, p.968). The following section therefore presents two outputs of Whitchurch's research and considers their relevance to LD.

Dimensions and phases of LD in the third space

This final section of this paper proposes Whitchurch's concepts of dimensions of third space activity and descriptions of phases of third space initiatives as practical heuristics to guide LD work in the third space. Although the general metaphor of third space has been much discussed in the LD literature, as shown above, these more practical outputs of Whitchurch's work are under-reported in the literature.

Dimensions of blended professional third space activity for LD

The learning developer role has been specifically identified as a blended professional role in HE third space (Whitchurch, 2018, p.13). Blended professionals are defined as those 'recruited to dedicated appointments that span both professional and academic domains (Whitchurch, 2009, p.3). As such, Whitchurch's four dimensions of blended professional activity could prove useful in helping learning developers understand and navigate the dynamics of the third space (Whitchurch, 2009). Based on substantial empirical research across HE institutions, these dimensions of 'spaces, knowledges, relationships, and legitimacies' have previously been used to interpret the work of learning designers working on online education projects in HE (White et al., 2021). However, as yet, they have not been explicitly explored in relation to LD. Table 1 below gives a detailed breakdown of each dimension, which, in summary:

> allow individuals flexibility to modify sometimes ambiguous [third space] professional and academic roles and structures (spaces), while integrating different forms of professional or academic knowledge (knowledges). Blended professionals are also able to create networks, alliances and autonomy (relationships) while challenging established roles and achieving credibility in a space where they both do and do not belong (legitimacies) (Whitchurch, 2009; in White et al., 2021, p.164).

These dimensions of blended professional roles could help learning developers think about the range of ways we might conduct our work, informing strategies for professional development and driving the development of LD provision in an institution from a third space perspective.

Table 1. Dimensions of professional activity of blended professionals in the third space in HE (Whitchurch, 2009).

Whitchurch's dimensions of blended professional activity	
Spaces	- offer multiple understandings of the institution - accommodate the ambiguities of third space between professional and academic domains - re-define, modify professional space and boundaries - work round formal structures
Knowledges	- embed and integrate professional and academic knowledge - undertake research into institutional activity - create an interactive knowledge environment
Relationships	- enter and understand academic discourse/ debate - form alliances with key partners - facilitate autonomy of own staff - construct professional networks, internally and externally
Legitimacies	- offer academic credentials - achieve credibility in academic debate/ space - challenge the status quo - manage the duality of 'belonging' and 'not belonging' to academic space

Though these dimensions have not been directly elaborated on in the LD literature, numerous studies exemplify these dimensions in theory or practice. For example, Buckley and Frith's idea of 'networked capital' (2024, p.36) draws on relevant ideas from the

dimensions, especially the ‘fluid and negotiated’ relationships which support collaborative work and projects via the specific expertise and knowledge of learning developers (knowledges). Recognition of expertise and the construction of internal and external networks are important in their conception of this networked approach. Webster (2024) demonstrates a nuanced awareness of spaces for third space work, in which learning developers actively use the ambiguities of third space roles to work ‘in the cracks’ or ‘under the radar’ (2024, p.21) whilst occupying a space between students and curriculum/institution (Webster, 2022). Webster also gives a crucial insight in highlighting how LD priorities can be articulated to align with institutional strategies, thus enhancing the legitimacies of LD initiatives. Whilst agreeing with the need for an awareness of ‘institutional goals’, Smith et al. also importantly highlight how third spaces allow for ‘agency and creativity’ (2021, p.514) in the way such alignment is presented or understood.

Engaging perhaps most extensively across Whitchurch’s dimensions is Hood’s discussion of ‘Succeeding in Learning Development’ (2024). Hood argues that learning developers can balance an appreciation of others’ perspectives with an ability ‘to speak their language and build effective relationships’ while leveraging relevant ‘expertise and knowledge’ (2024, p.196-197). She also highlights the value of ‘having other third space allies’ and using formal university structures to enable LD work – for example by engaging with relevant working groups and meetings (2024, p.198). Hood’s recommendations relate indirectly to all four dimensions, but, by elaborating on each dimension in depth (see Table 1), Whitchurch provides insight and guidance for learning developers about how we might practically ‘harness the opportunities that this positioning affords us’ (Hood, 2024, p.196).

Tables 2-5 below provide possible practical examples of LD activity to illustrate each of the particular dimensions of spaces (Table 2), knowledges (Table 3), relationships (Table 4), and legitimacies (Table 5):

Table 2. Possible practical examples of LD activity related to Whitchurch's dimension of space.

Dimension: Spaces	**Example in LD practice: *working on online learning and teaching projects***
Offer multiple understandings of the institution	Consider the distinct perspectives and priorities of other stakeholders involved, such as learning technologists/learning designers, librarians, academics, quality assurance, language support (e.g. EAP), assistive technology support. Identify where roles and boundaries overlap, and where LD occupies a space between students and curriculum/institution (Webster, 2022). Emphasise shared interests and outcomes. Align outputs with what you see as best practice from a LD perspective using your third space 'agency and creativity' (Smith et al., 2021, p.514).
Accommodate the ambiguities of third space	
Re-define, modify professional space and boundaries	
Work round formal structures	

Table 3. Possible practical examples of LD activity related to Whitchurch's dimension of knowledges.

Dimension: knowledges	**Example in LD practice: *join the academic debate***
Embed and integrate professional and academic knowledge	Participate in institutional events (such as learning and teaching or careers events and training), ensuring you highlight the research basis for any LD resources, interventions and collaborations with which your team is associated. Share and integrate this LD knowledge with that of academic, library or learning technologist colleagues. Share and integrate your professional knowledge with management, for example of how your work aligns with university access and participation plans (APPs) or major strategic projects related to teaching and learning (Webster, 2022).
Undertake research into institutional activity	
Create an interactive knowledge environment	

Table 4. Possible practical examples of LD activity related to Whitchurch's dimension of relationships.

Dimension: relationships	**Example in LD practice: *join and shape networks***
Enter and understand academic discourse/ debate	Join and contribute to institutional networks such as teaching and learning groups, EDI networks, or student/staff peer-learning initiatives. Recognise that third space relationships can be 'fluid and negotiated' (Buckley and Frith, 2024, p.36). As such, tailor explanations of your role and evidence you present (whether academic or practical) to 'speak their language' (Hood, 2024, p. 196) and help your audience understand and value your specific perspective, knowledge and expertise (Buckley and Frith, 2024, p.36; Hood, 2024). Create 'third space allies' (Hood, 2024, p.198) by highlighting how your knowledge and practice can help students and colleagues. Access external LD and education-related groups/networks, develop and share knowledge and techniques.
Facilitate autonomy of own staff	
Form alliances with key partners	
Construct professional networks, internally and externally	

Table 5. Possible practical examples of LD activity related to Whitchurch's dimension of legitimacies.

Dimension: legitimacies	**Example in LD practice: *work to develop formal and practical credibility***
Offer academic credentials	Acknowledge that credibility can be developed via both formal means (qualifications, research knowledge, evidence of effective practice) and informal performance (delivering, reliability, recognising others' perspective). Accept that third space working means others might perceive your role in ways you do not, and, if necessary, work to change that perception through your actions. Exploit the third space 'cracks' in institutions (Webster, 2024, p.21) where you can do the job in the way you see as best practice from your LD perspective.
Achieve credibility in academic debate/ space	
Challenge the status quo	
Manage the duality of 'belonging' and 'not belonging' to academic space	

Phases of third space activity for LD

In addition to the dimensions, Whitchurch and Law (2010) describe three typical phases of third space initiatives:

1. Contestation.
2. Reconciliation.
3. Reconstruction.

These phases are derived from empirical evidence of how third space initiatives typically evolve in HE institutions. Though rarely mentioned in the LD literature, these phases provide a lens through which "the dynamics of third space environments might be described and understood" (Whitchurch and Law, 2010). The phases can overlap, but nevertheless provide an interesting summary of the dynamics of third space activities, based on a synthesis of substantial empirical evidence. Experienced learning developers might reflect on the extent to which these descriptions reflect their experiences, while those newer to the role can use them as a guide to how future projects might evolve, or to diagnose the current stage of an ongoing project, and thus attempt to respond appropriately to emergent challenges.

In Table 6 below, the first and second columns name and explain the three phases of Whitchurch and Law's (2010) model. The third column relates these phases to typical events within the development of an LD initiative. The examples are illustrative, not drawn from formal research.

Table 6. Three phases of third space initiatives.

Phases of third space initiatives (Whitchurch and Law, 2010)	**Whitchurch and Law's description (2010)**	**Illustrative example from an initiative embedding LD into an academic module**
Contestation	Tensions and challenges of working across professional and academic spheres become apparent. Individuals define themselves in relation to 'rules and resources' of an institution for	• Academic requests a session on 'essay writing' to address high failure rates in a particular

	pragmatic reasons but may not privately identify with them.	module/assessment component. • The session requested is a single support session, outside of course timetable. No example materials are provided. • LD resists these requests, asking for more extensive collaboration and a timetabled session.
Reconciliation	Negotiation of difference as the possibility for fruitful collaboration emerges. Critical exchange and sharing of multiple perspectives occurs in the context of commitment to overall ideological aims of a project.	• Concessions are made, in which the academic provides some relevant materials (assignment brief, previous essay(s), representative reading material) and time within a session for a learning developer to engage with students. • Academic sees relevance and impact of subject-relevant LD materials and teaching. • Learning developer sees pressures on academic's time within the module, levels of engagement and attitudes to reading and writing at cohort level.
Reconstruction	Active participation of individuals toward the creation of a pluralistic environment in which new rules and resources are created in relation to the new space. New identities and networks develop, perhaps alongside new language or extended	• Subsequent iterations of the intervention involve negotiation of academic-LD co-teaching related to the module assignment. • Perhaps further forms of support are developed (e.g. peer

	understandings of certain terms (Whitchurch and Law, 2010)	support/evaluation activities, student input into assignment brief, activities encouraging student engagement with marking criteria). • Academic engages more independently in developing learning activities for writing tasks, further engagement with the degree programme is developed beyond the module.

Overall, these dimensions and phases of blended professional activity can 'offer multiple understandings of the institution' and 'accommodate the ambiguities of third space between professional and academic domains' (Whitchurch, 2008, p.382). These frameworks align well with the broader goals of critical theory, providing clear ways to resist 'reification', in which the way universities are 'organised appear as natural and beyond question' and actually provide empirical evidence of how 'things could be different' (How, 2003, p.172-173). In this way, they might be put to practical use in the kind of heuristic space which aligns with the visions of social justice approaches expressed by McArthur (2016), Webster (2024) or Johnson and Bishopp-Martin (2024).

Conclusion

This theoretical discussion analysed the intersection of third space and LD thinking in recent literature. It traced the origins of some key third space ideas in critical theory and subsequently in social justice approaches to LD, exploring potential contradictions in the application of these critical approaches. The discussion touched on the tension between ideas of marginalisation and agency in the third space of LD, and the difficulty of proposing a neutral third space for LD activity. It also highlighted the value of 'hybrid' perspectives in aiding self-reflection on LD, and the problems of establishing principles for, or evaluations of, critical approaches. As a possible way forward, Whitchurch's dimensions of blended

professional activity and phases of third space processes are suggested as practical tools which can help learning developers think about their practice.

This paper is limited to a theoretical discussion of third space concepts and social justice thinking as applied to the third space in HE. Further research might address and attempt to resolve the apparent contradictions in social justice approaches to research or collect more empirical research which supports the coherence of such approaches.

Acknowledgements

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

References

Abegglen, S., Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2019) 'It's learning development, Jim - but not as we know it: academic literacies in third-space', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education,* 15. Available at: https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i15.500.

Ajjawi, R., Bennett, L., Carless, D., Clarence, S., Hall, M., O'Leary, M., Oliver, M., Prinsloo, P. and Turner, R. (2022) 'Exploring what it means for teaching in higher education to have "critical perspectives"', *Teaching in Higher Education:Critical Perspectives*. Available: https://teachinginhighereducation.wordpress.com/exploring-what-it-means-for-teaching-in-higher-education-to-have-critical-perspectives/ (Accessed: 11 September 2024).

ALDinHE (2023) *Manifesto for learning development*. ALDinHE. Available at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KJnC7e2l5xnA44FWsOxaKkKNx4SQKlX2/view (Accessed: 11 September 2024).

Asher, G. (2024) 'Learning development in, against, and beyond the neoliberal university: critical learning development and critical academic literacies', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education: critical*

perspectives, community and practice. London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003433347.

Bhandari, N.B. (2022) 'Homi K. Bhabha's third space theory and cultural identity today: a critical review', *Prithvi Academic Journal,* 5(1)**,** pp 171-181. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3126/paj.v5i1.45049.

Biesta, G. (2017) 'Don't be fooled by ignorant schoolmasters: on the role of the teacher in emancipatory education', *Policy Futures in Education,* 15(1)**,** pp.52-73. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210316681202.

Bishopp-Martin, S. and Johnson, I. (2024) 'Research and scholarship in learning development', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practice.* London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003433347.

Bloch, S. and Brasdefer, T. (2023) 'Edward W. Soja's radical spatial perspective', *Human Geography,* 16(3)**,** pp.233-243. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/19427786231175849.

Buckley, C. and Frith, L. (2024) 'The development of expertise and identity within a community of practice: a networking model', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practice.* London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003433347.

Celikates, R. and Flynn, J. (2023) 'Critical Theory (Frankfurt School)', in Edward N. Zalta, E.N. and Nodelman, U. (eds.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition). Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/critical-theory/ (Accessed: 11 September 2024).

Dhillon, S. (2022) 'Pedagogies of discomfort and neoliberal universities', in C. Buckley and A. Syska (eds.) *The Learning Development Project.* Association for Learning

Development in Higher Education. Available at: https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/ldproject/episodes/Sunny-Dhillon-pedagogies-of-discomfort-and-the-neoliberal-university-e1r862p.

Dhillon, S. (2024) 'Critical self-reflection in learning development', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practice.* London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003433347.

Grayson, N. and Syska, A. (2024) 'Hybrid learning developers: between the discipline and the discipline', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practice.* London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003433347.

Haidt, J.(2012) *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*, New York: Vintage.

Hanesworth, P., Bracken, S. and Elkington, S. (2019) 'A typology for a social justice approach to assessment: learning from universal design and culturally sustaining pedagogy', *Teaching in Higher Education,* 24(1)**,** pp.98-114. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1465405.

Hood, S. (2024) 'Succeeding at learning development', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practice.* London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003433347.

How, A.(2003) *Critical Theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Johnson, I.P. (2018) 'Driving learning development professionalism forward from within', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i0.470.

Johnson, I. and Bishopp-Martin, S. (2024) 'Conceptual foundations in learning development', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practice.* London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003433347.

Kramm, N. and McKenna, S. (2023) 'AI amplifies the tough question: what is higher education really for?', *Teaching in Higher Education,* 28(8)**,** pp.2173-2178. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2023.2263839.

LaFollette, H. and Woodruff, M.L. (2015) 'The righteous mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion: the limits of Haidt: how his explanation of political animosity fails', *Philosophical Psychology,* 28(3)**,** pp.452-465. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2013.838752.

Lea, M.R. and Street, B.V. (1998) 'Student writing in higher education: an academic literacies approach', *Studies in Higher Education,* 23(2)**,** pp.157-172. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079812331380364.

McArthur, J. (2016) 'Assessment for social justice: the role of assessment in achieving social justice', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,* 41(7)**,** pp. 967-981. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1053429.

McArthur, J. (2023) 'Understanding social justice: why it matters', *PRISM: Casting New Light on Learning, Theory and Practice,* 5(2)**,** pp. 9-17. Available at: https://doi.org/10.24377/prism.article1835.

McIntosh, E. and Nutt, D. (2022) *The impact of the integrated practitioner in higher education.* Abingdon, VA: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003037569.

McKenna, S. (2022) 'Plagiarism and the commodification of knowledge', *Higher Education,* 84**,** pp. 1283-1298. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00926-5.

Merrifield, A. (1999) 'The extraordinary voyages of Ed Soja: inside the "trialectics of spatiality"', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers,* 89(2), pp.345–347. https://doi.org/10.1111/0004-5608.00151.

Neiman, S. (2023) *Left is not Woke*, New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Price, P. (1999) 'Longing for less of the same', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 89(2) pp. 342-344. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/0004-5608.00150.

Schneijderberg, C. and Merkator, N. (2013) 'The new higher education professionals', in B. Kehm and U. Teichler (eds) *The academic profession in Europe: new tasks and new challenges***.** Dordrecht: Springer. pp. 53-92 Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4614-5_5.

Selemani, A., Chawinga, W.D. and Dube, G. (2018) 'Why do postgraduate students commit plagiarism? An empirical study', *International Journal for Educational Integrity,* 14(7) pp. 1-15. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-018-0029-6.

Smith, C., Holden, M., Yu, E. and Hanlon, P. (2021) '"So what do you do?": third space professionals navigating a Canadian university context', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management,* 43(5) pp. 505-519. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2021.1884513.

Soja, E. W. 1996. *Thirdspace,* Malden (Mass.): Wiley Blackwell

Syska, A. and Buckley, C. (2024) *How to be a learning developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practice*. London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003433347.

Webster, H. (2022) 'Supporting the development, recognition, and impact of third space professionals', in E. Mcintosh and D. Nutt (eds.) *The impact of the integrated*

practitioner in higher education. London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003037569.

Webster, H. (2024) 'Raising the profile of learning development in higher education: institutional and sector perspectives', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practice.* London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003433347.

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. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2008.00387.x.

Whitchurch, C. (2009) 'The rise of the blended professional in higher education: a comparison between the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States', *Higher Education,* 58**,** pp.407-418. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9202-4.

Whitchurch, C. (2010) 'Some implications of "public/private" space for professional identities in higher education', *Higher education,* 60**,** pp. 627-640. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9320-z.

Whitchurch, C. (2012) *Reconstructing identities in higher education: the rise of 'third space' professionals*. London, Routledge.

Whitchurch, C. (2018) 'Being a higher education professional today: working in a third space', in C. Bossu and N. Brown (eds.) *Professional and support staff in higher education*. Singapore: Springer.

Whitchurch, C. and Law, P. (2010) *Optimising the potential of third space professionals in UK higher education*. Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/optimising-potential-third-space-professionals-final-report (Accessed: 18 September 2024).

White, S. (2023) 'Be real: can learning always be fun?', *Educational Developments*, 24. Available at: https://www.seda.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Ed-Devs-24.4.pdf (Accessed: 18 September 2024).

White, S., White, S. and Borthwick, K. (2021) 'Blended professionals, technology and online learning: identifying a socio-technical third space in higher education', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 75(1), pp.161-174. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12252.

Author details

Steven White is a Senior Teaching Fellow in Education Development at the University of Southampton. He has had an interest in contrasting perspectives on learning and teaching since a senior colleague told him he ‘bloody well better be’ a social constructivist. His research interests include third-space perspectives on HE, digital and media literacy, and teaching/learning critical thinking.

Licence