



# **A narrative account of third space technology enhanced learning and teaching roles working in Australian higher education**

**Kate Mitchell**

University of Melbourne, Australia

**Kashmira Dave**

University of New England, Australia

**Meredith Hinze**

University of Melbourne, Australia

**Alex Tsirgialos**

University of Melbourne, Australia

## ***Abstract***

We provide a collaborative autoethnographic narrative account (Poulos, 2021) of our experiences as practitioners working in overlapping, related Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) roles (academic developer, learning designer, educational technologist) in Australian universities. Despite wide ranging demand for our roles, particularly during and post COVID pandemic (Bellaby and Sankey, 2020; Baré et al., 2021) these ‘third space’ roles (Whitchurch 2008; 2013) are often not well understood (Mitchell et al., 2017; Altena et al., 2019). Such roles may experience challenges in credibility and visibility (Fyffe, 2018), relationship-building (Mitchell et al., 2017), and limitations for career progression (Slade et al., 2019). We provide a selection of our accounts related specifically to key tensions for third space TEL roles in building collaborative relationships and what these contradictions in practice can mean for productivity, morale, wellbeing, career progression and identity formation.

Our autoethnographic process has uncovered connections between professional identity, professional relationships and organisational context that provide insight into tensions for third space productivity and morale. We propose a tentative framework to explain the relationships of these connections, which may support those in third space TEL roles and

their managers in making sense of their identities. By discussing our own journeys, not only can we begin to uncover tensions more fully, but we also uncover viable solutions to the way progression pathways, organisational structures and relationships across teams are conceived and leveraged within and across the sector.

**Keywords:** third space, autoethnography, professional identity, technology enhanced learning.

### ***Position statement***

Our ethnographic reflective accounts as third space professionals are based on a wide variety of work with multiple Australian universities, in cross-institutional projects and from the vast ocean of experience that we have collected from decades of working in this field. Alignment of any of our reflections should not be taken as our view about any institution or people, as reflections may refer to an amalgamation of experiences from different institutions at different times. Reflections in this paper are limited to only certain issues due to ethical and word count constraints.

### ***Introduction***

Roles such as academic developer, learning designer and educational technologist – that work directly with academic teaching staff to improve teaching, design and scholarship in blended and online learning experiences – are at the forefront of supporting shifts within higher education brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bellaby and Sankey, 2020; Baré et al., 2021). These roles, often termed 'third space' roles (Whitchurch, 2013; 2017) operate in the liminal space between academic and professional domains, navigating contested territory. The work is often practice-based, roles are multifaceted, and the titles, duties and classifications may be ambiguous and vary greatly between institutions (Mitchell et al., 2017) similar to the experiences of learning developers (Bickle et al., 2021; Bickle et al., 2022; Bishopp-Martin et al., 2023; Mossman, 2023).

We, the authors, make up a cross-section of these roles, holding titles including Lecturer, Academic Development (Kashmira), Senior Learning Designer (Alex, Kate) and eLearning

Manager (Meredith). We broadly define our fields (academic development, learning design and educational technology, respectively) within the realm of Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL). These roles often work cross-functionally with teaching academics and other third space roles (such as learning developers) to implement educational change projects, where productive ways of working are paramount to a project's success. Our roles thus embody tensions in practice as we straddle the political, technical, pedagogical and mentorship aspects of the TEL third space. These tensions have potential impacts on professional identity – the professional self-concept made up of beliefs, values, experiences and other attributes – which may be fragile or undermined for certain groups (Slay and Smith, 2011).

The four of us are also in positions of and/or have experience with line management or team management. In our own roles and when managing and mentoring others, we have observed how limitations and tensions experienced by those in our roles can impact morale and productivity. As such, we are in a position to advocate for the support needs of third space TEL roles, including strategies for those managing relevant teams.

The aim of this paper is to unpack these tensions in our own work and lives, in the hopes of highlighting some of the experiences of third space roles. Our accounts provide voices missing in the literature as the existing third space research has often been undertaken by academic researchers who do not necessarily work specifically in these roles. We hope our accounts provide others with a better understanding of the specific challenges that exist in practice for our roles and the support needed from managers and organisations, in order to move our professions forward. Our accounts may resonate with other third space practitioners and highlight common challenges that third space roles share, as well as possibilities for better shared ways of working.

## ***Methodology***

We employed reflective autoethnographic written accounts achieved through a process akin to Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998). Our methodology is informed by:

- Autoethnography (Poulos, 2012; 2017; 2021).
- Narrative inquiry and narrative accounts (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

- Third space (Whitchurch, 2008; 2013).
- Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) and virtual Communities of Practice (Bickle et al., 2021).

Autoethnography, a process of recounting and analysing the author's lived experience, 'connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues' (Poulos, 2021, p.4). Third space research has previously acknowledged social and political contexts and tensions, dilemmas and paradoxes (Whitchurch, 2013), thereby making autoethnography a relevant methodology when discussing third space roles and relationships.

Both autoethnography and narrative inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990) are aligned to Communities of Practice (CoPs). Wenger (1998) discusses CoPs as people coming together in a shared domain and learning through community, with the power to shape their professional identity and career journey. Poulos (2021) justifies autoethnography as a transformative process when engaged in a reading-reflecting-writing loop, relevant to a CoP. Virtual Communities of Practice (vCoPs) offer benefits for helping geographically dispersed, third space professionals connect for a shared sense of identity and engagement in activities (such as research) that would not be possible alone (Bickle et al., 2021).

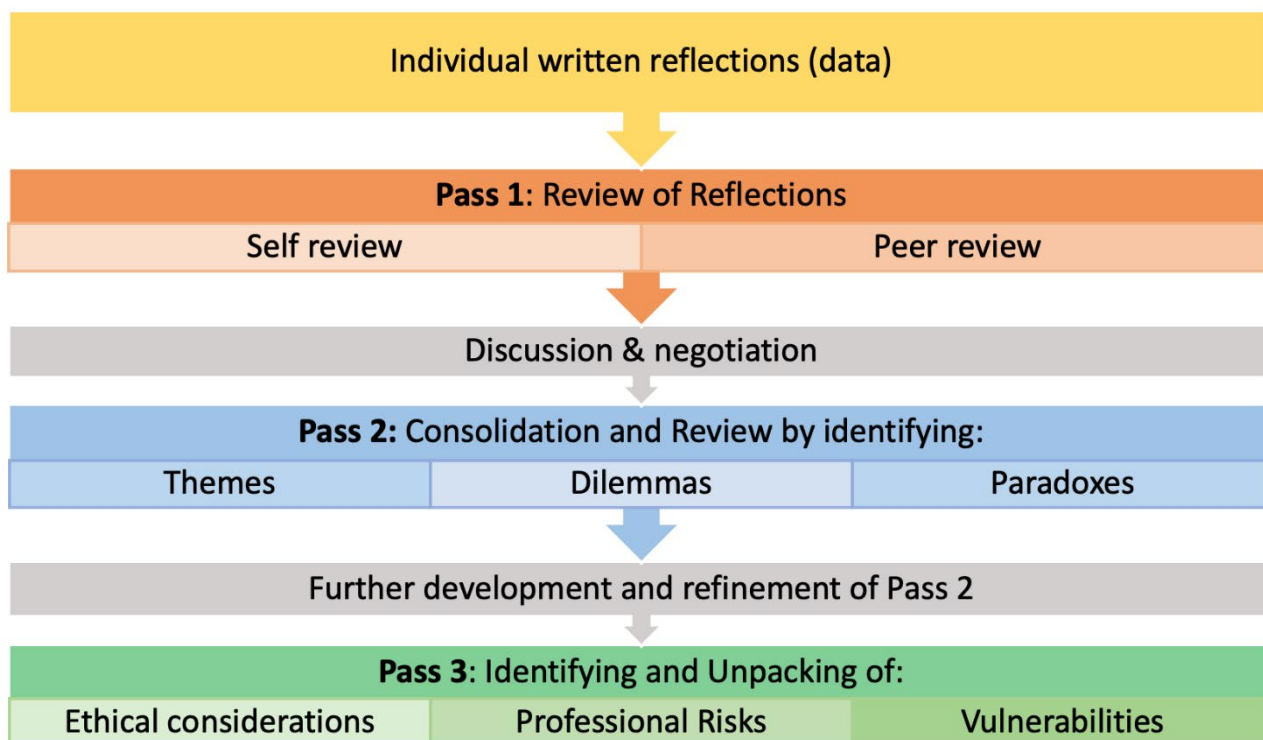
While the ways in which CoPs can be enacted vary, we have undertaken negotiation of meaning through processes of participation (via shared discussion) and reification (producing reflective artefacts) as part of our collaborative autoethnographic process. Our autoethnographic accounts, utilising the affordances of vCoPs, have enabled us to reflexively make sense of our accounts. We recognise the nuances of the ideas from our accounts of third space practice are from a small group of authors and are not transferrable to the wider community, but we believe the issues and themes that emerged will have relevance to other similar roles.

## **Method**

We undertook this project over a period of approximately six months (June/July 2023 to January/February 2024) with the following approach:

- A series of vCoP discussions around our roles and tensions in third space, brainstorming emergent themes.
- Comparison and mapping of themes to Whitchurch’s (2015) third space key areas of identity utilised as part of her interview topic guide.
- Developing detailed prompts for reflection, expanding upon Whitchurch’s (2015) topic guide, cross referenced to Obexer (2022).
- Individually developing written reflections responding to the prompts, over a two- to three-month period (November 2023 to January 2024).
- Analysis through multiple passes of review, discussion and negotiation (as depicted in Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Block diagram explaining layered approach to analysis.**



We identified through our discussions, the importance of institutional context, contained in Whitchurch (2015) and our own themes but not adequately addressed through Whitchurch’s topic guide. The organisation itself can be considered an actor that causes tensions and disruptions in practice (Engeström et al., 1995; Latour, 1996). As such, we modified our instrument to include institutional context as an additional, explicit theme to give voice to the contextual nature of our work. We acknowledge that alternative instruments to Whitchurch (2015) could be explored in future research. For example,

threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2005) have been suggested to uncover the work of learning developers (White, 2023) and may support a more emergent, community-based approach.

## **Analysis**

As part of the vCoP process, we have undertaken a layered approach to analysis. Multiple passes of reviewing allowed us to unpack and thematically group what were complex, entangled themes, and also to uncover their messy, intertwined nature. Muncey (2010) recognises this messiness is an integral part of autoethnography. Where possible, we highlight these complex relationships in the Discussion section below. Through the process, we negotiated consent and ethical practice around identifiable data (Pass 3, see Figure 1).

## **Discussion**

Our own reflections, the process of review and analysis uncovered several commonalities and tensions in practice. These are discussed below, organised into sub-category themes under our broader modified categories of Whitchurch's areas of identity: professional career, professional relationships, professional influence, professional development and professional context. We then offer a framework to conceptualise the interplay of these themes.

Each of our relevant backgrounds is useful context to our reflections, while noting our reflections often include fluid reference to multiple past roles/institutions.

- **Alex:** senior learning designer (background in teaching, management experience)
- **Kashmira:** lecturer, Academic Development (background as learning designer and STEM educator)
- **Kate:** senior learning designer (background in teaching and media production, small team management experience)
- **Meredith:** eLearning manager (for an education technology team, background in educational technology and teaching)

## Theme 1: professional career

We described our roles as second or third career shifts or a transition from other related roles, indicative of others in the field (Sage and Sankey, 2021). In all our reflections, diversity in skill sets and leveraging existing skills for further career progression was common. Meredith noted, 'I intentionally pursued opportunities to develop skills in both teaching and technical support and especially where I saw there was connection between them'. Kate described choosing learning design for the ability to leverage relevant skills in both teaching and media production. Such comments suggested we were drawn to our roles because of the ability to blend a diverse range of skills. Bell (2023) likewise describes 'squiggly' or 'non-conventional' career paths of third space roles, and the valuable breadth of skills that can be gained through such trajectories.

All of us discussed the muddiness of shifting role scope and intersections with other roles. Kate and Meredith both described their roles as shifting, within 'liminal' space. Such accounts are reflected by others (Little and Green, 2012; Fyffe, 2018; McKay and Robson, 2023) in relation to third space role liminality or being in the 'margins'. Kate described how her work was influenced by the role scope of other teams and the politics and hierarchies involved:

My relational position is often defined by projects and the others/other roles involved in the project, so my role and what I do within it is often shaped by the presence or absence of other roles (academic developers, project managers) as I may be limited in territory by the other roles or my role scope may expand to do more of that work in their absence. My ability to go 'outside of my lane' may be shaped by the presence of these other roles and the politics of the institutional space (Kate).

Diversity in skill set was not always discussed positively: Alex and Kashmira suggested diverse skills and work duties within roles and teams caused confusion when working with others and limited broader professionalisation of the field (we return to this point under Theme 4). For example, Alex highlighted 'a very big discrepancy of skills and experience within the same teams...' while team members were still expected to achieve the same outputs under the same pay scales. He felt this was 'one of the critical issues in defining professional identity' for achieving legitimacy and professionalisation. However, he wavered on whether this is the responsibility of management (through recruitment), or up



to us as a profession to 'draw a line' in terms of role expectations and consistent quality of work.

Kashmira discussed the 'divergence and convergence' of learning technologists and learning designers, further exposing both managers' and individuals' influence in this confusion:

The delineation between learning technologists and learning designers, though apparent in job descriptions, dissolved in the day-to-day reality of the roles. The nuanced similarities between the two positions hinted at a broader trend—a convergence that contradicted the separation advocated in university advertisements. This merging of roles added another layer of complexity to the already intricate landscape of third space professionals (Kashmira).

Alex reflected, '...third space professionals cannot agree on a definition [for their TEL roles] because the roles they are in often intersect with other roles and the skills required [are] so broad that often people find themselves doing work they shouldn't be doing'. He, however, also suggested that some of the overlaps between roles may come from individuals sticking to where they are 'comfortable' in terms of their existing skill set.

## **Theme 2: professional relationships**

We reflected on others' perceptions of our roles and how this shaped our identity. Our reflections spanned professional relationships and professional context, and their effect on both identity and perceived or actual professional influence, as messy entanglements. While we have separated professional relationships (Theme 2) and professional influence (Theme 3) as per Whitchurch (2015), our reflections show these are heavily linked in practice.

All of our reflections suggested learning designer roles were perceived or assumed by academic teaching staff as technical and often less welcome in pedagogical discussions.

...teaching staff see academic developers as peers, study-buddies or sounding boards for ideas (in other words a safe place to discuss) whereas learning designers are ultimately left with the task of implementing the fruits of this professional development (Alex).



Kashmira and Kate suggested that such questions of legitimacy with academic staff were driven by an 'unspoken hierarchy within academia' (Kashmira). Kashmira recounted past professional experience where such perceptions or hierarchy led to limitations in influence or role scope: '...rendering my insights as a [learning] designer seemingly inconsequential. Despite formal qualifications in education, my professional standing seemed to overshadow my academic credentials'.

Meredith's reflections vary from the others, however: Meredith notes that her team's location based in the faculty, positions them as 'trusted colleagues', as '...the teaching staff we work with have advocated for us, acknowledging our work and its impact on student experience'. Her reflection infers an intersect between institutional context and professional relationships, and potential influence afforded by location.

I see this as one of the advantages of working in a team embedded in a faculty context – we have got to know individual academics very well. This close proximity and situational context means we have built strong partnerships and trust with the academics (Meredith).

Alex, Kate and Meredith recounted positive and negative experiences of working with other related third space roles in other teams (such as academic developers or librarians), doing overlapping work on TEL projects. They highlighted the effects or consequences of positive and negative working relationships.

Negative flow on effects ranged from academic staff hearing mixed or conflicting messages (Alex), work that needed to be duplicated or recreated (Kate), to further institutional siloing from damaged relationships (Alex).

Positive relationships seemed to be related to a sense of potential validity in the space that may translate to influence, wellbeing and purpose. Kate suggested opportunities to forge new boundaries in practice and exert more influence via building positive, respectful relationships, but these may need to happen at an individual grassroots level:

...I've been really lucky to forge some amazing professional relationships with a couple of academic developers who have been incredibly generous with their time and knowledge and have treated me as an equal in the space. It reminds me that some of these boundaries and silos we seem to have in higher education are not with individuals, but with the systems, and that the most important thing we can do is to keep building relationships, even if it is one at a time (Kate).

Our reflections suggest that a level of identity and belonging may be linked to building trusted relationships. Finding ways to better support positive, respectful, collaborative relationship-building across cross-functional third space teams, may not only improve productivity and break down silos, but also lead to third space workers' improved emotional wellbeing and psychological safety.

Further research into the extent organisational and faculty structure may play in relationship-building should be undertaken to tease out these themes, as it may be applicable to other third space roles such as learning development. Organisational structures and context influencing our roles will be expanded upon in Theme 5.

### **Theme 3: professional influence**

The third space literature provides mixed reports on agency and influence – often describing third space roles as having a high level of autonomy, varying degrees of agency (Campbell et al., 2005; McKay and Robson, 2023) and potentially limited authority (Schwier et al., 2007). Therefore, there may be a need to exert leadership through 'stealth', particularly when facing challenges of being expected to lead or manage 'individuals not directly reporting to me' (Kashmira). Each of us handled relationship boundaries and influence in different ways. For example, Alex described and gave examples of 'adjusting to the audience I am addressing' to demonstrate legitimacy and exert influence.

Alex linked challenges in agency and control in the work as a limitation of professional influence and linked it to decreased wellbeing and morale. A similar theme was alluded to by Kashmira as she noted in a previous role, she 'had to put all my skills and understanding aside and do what I was told to do which was not always [the] right thing to do, but I had no choice'.

Our reflections demonstrate the nuances of how third space roles lead through influence and relationship building in practice. Complexities related to relationships, power and agency seem to suggest potential consequences for third space roles' productivity, morale, and wellbeing. The level of emotional intelligence needed is often not recognised within

the requirements of the roles and may need to be more formally acknowledged by managers, particularly when recruiting and supporting third space career development.

#### **Theme 4: professional development**

We reflected on our own career advancement and past, current and future career progression goals and interests. The reflections noted consideration to the academic-professional divide and perceived limitations in progressing toward leadership, especially for those of us in professional roles.

Literature suggests that learning designers, despite often holding postgraduate qualifications and multiple years of experience in the field (Sage and Sankey, 2021), are predominantly employed in roles in a narrow band range (Higher Education Worker Level 7 or 8 'professional' non-academic staff classification), with limited progression opportunities outside of these bands (Slade et al., 2019). Alex and Kate discussed their limitations in progression from professional to academic roles or the 'glass cliff' for learning designers (Kate, referencing Sage and Sankey, 2021) perhaps due to the lack of a PhD.

Kashmira, who does hold a PhD, reflected that her transition from a learning designer (professional staff classification) to academic developer role (academic staff classification) was an 'anomaly rather than a norm', reiterating perceptions that third space role progression especially across an academic/professional divide may be difficult. However, Kashmira argued that diversity in skill sets and skill 'fit' were equally important as part of career advancement:

The people who come from teaching may lack technical skills and tech people may lack understanding and experience of how people learn. So, people with different skills when [they] try to progress into well defined (e.g. academic) roles, they are disappointed because they could not progress (Kashmira).

Alex observed that 'most learning designers have leadership traits [...] as it requires influencing others, stakeholder management, problem-solving, heightened emotional intelligence and empathy' but this did not translate to 'learning designers in the decision-making space related to education strategy'. His reflection hints not only at limitations in career progression but to limitations to level of influence and a potential lack of leadership role models for learning designers.

These contrasting views of third space development suggest a mix of reasons for perceived career progression challenges such as a mismatch of skills to expectations (and a 'tech vs pedagogy' divide or gap), issues of validity (whether imposed or perceived) and unspoken rules and hierarchies (academic/professional divide, qualifications requirements) which may lead to broader feelings of inadequacy or resentment by some in third space roles.

Kashmira's and Alex's reflections from Themes 1 and 4 combined, highlight the potential dual responsibility of both managers and third space workers to ensure consistency in role clarity, and scope and quality of work for greater professionalisation and validity of the field. Slade et al. (2019) additionally reported a mismatch between career progression interests of learning designers and perceived pathways by higher level directors. Managers should therefore consider open discussions within their teams to better understand and provide clarity around progression interests, challenges and opportunities for how third space TEL careers can develop.

Kashmira, Kate and Meredith reflected on the value of networks and subcultures within and outside of the institution, as 'critical catalysts' (Kashmira) in their professional development. They suggested networks provide a way to build community, resilience and wellbeing in the face of morale challenges, especially in tough times or where the institutional contexts do not enable enough avenues of development, as encapsulated by Kate's quote: 'I have lots of connections and relationships with others, which allows me to build community and organise the kind of work I want to create outside of an institution, no matter where I am and what limitations are imposed in my work structures'.

Meredith highlighted personal, professional and scholarly benefits from participating in a range of third space TEL special interest groups, communities of practice and mentoring programs offered through relevant higher education professional organisations. She noted such professional development groups '...have given me the opportunity to contribute as a professional staff member to research and work collaboratively with academics in SoTEL (Scholarship of Technology Enhanced Learning) research in a very positive third space environment'.

These reflections show the value of respectful partnerships and networks for identity building. They also give insights into how third space individuals can take advantage of development opportunities which may have benefits for their wellbeing and access or exposure to more diverse role models.

### **Theme 5: professional context**

Upon reflection, it became clear that our institutional context(s) affected our perceptions of the scope of our roles and, in turn, our wellbeing. In some ways, the organisational structure and culture is another actor (Latour, 1996) shaping our relationships and the nature of our work. For those of us in professional roles, the academic-professional divide was raised in relation to how this might be affected by organisational structures and expectations of others.

Kate, Meredith and Alex all described tensions (and at times, opportunities) related to service provisioning. The nature of their professional relationship with academics and other third space roles was shaped by team structures and expectations of their work as a client service compared to a mentorship, pedagogical, or project-based collaboration model. For example, Meredith noted a shift over time in her team's work:

...away from exploration and seeding of innovative TEL projects and [a] project [based] model (blended learning development ranging from small- to full-scale remodelling of subjects) to, more recently, an emphasis on the support/service provision (i.e. actioning service requests) (Meredith).

She mentioned an 'invisible learning design gap' in the way her team were organised within the faculty and increasingly utilised as a service provision. Alex expressed related frustrations of learning designers being '...expected to simply execute the 'technical' aspect of learning design, or in many cases simply making something "look good"'. He noted this was exacerbated by using learning design teams '...as service provision despite all the literature pointing in the direction of respectful partnerships as the model producing the best results'.

Alex highlighted the role of managers in defining the team and organisational structures and type of work accordingly:

Another frequent tension comes from attitudes towards the way work is organised, for example, is the work a service-delivery model or a collaborative partnership? Managers of learning design teams have a responsibility in establishing this so that learning designers can act accordingly (Alex).

Taken as a whole, such reflections suggested frustration for some TEL roles in how structures for third space TEL teams may be organised or utilised within institutions, or frustration when the purpose of these structures is not clearly communicated. Our reflections tentatively suggest that differing work structures may also produce different results in terms of quality TEL outputs. As such, managers should at least consider different work and structural models when forming or organising third space teams. They may also need to advocate for work structures that best suit the TEL goals they or their organisation hope to achieve. Further research into organisational models for third space TEL teams should be a focus in the future.

### **A framework for third space TEL role professional identity**

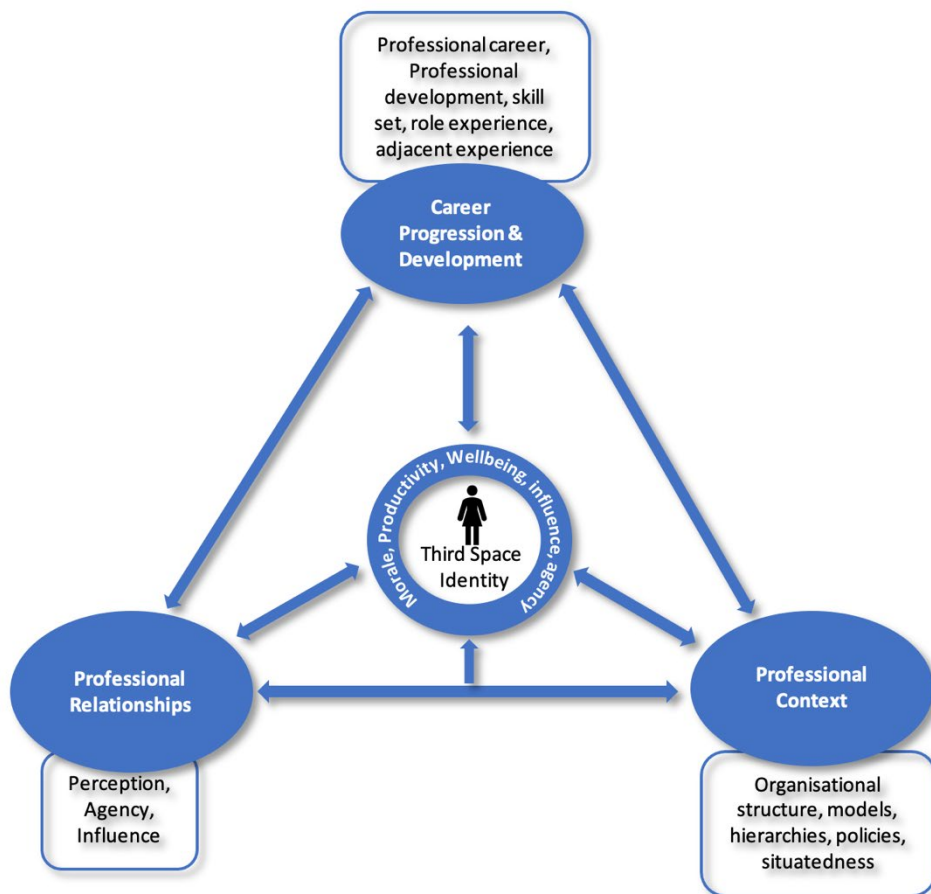
Our reflections demonstrate the messy, entangled nature of professional relationships, context, and identity, and some interesting contradictions in practice. We offer a framework to capture this interplay of professional context, professional relationships, and career progression and development, in relation to third space TEL roles' professional identity.

The framework highlights three key areas:

- *Career progression and development* incorporates our own past professional backgrounds and professional development goals for the future (Themes 1 and 4), highlighting that both together shape our skill sets and our identity, and may influence or be influenced by professional relationships and professional context. Our own backgrounds and existing identity may also shape our professional development interests and progression strategies.
- *Professional relationships* with other third space roles, academics, and managers (Themes 2 and 3) can individually and together have a direct impact on the scope and productivity of work we do, how we feel about the work and perceptions of our own identities (including perceptions of agency, wellbeing and morale).
- *Professional context* (Theme 5) not only shapes our work but also how we experience and perceive our roles and professional relationships, in turn shaping

identity, sense of agency, and morale. The professional context such as silos, territories and expectations can shape the relationships we may build with others within the institution.

**Figure 2. Framework of themes shaping TEL roles third space identity in higher education.**



As demonstrated in Figure 2, there is an interplay and, in many cases, dual-direction relationships between themes, demonstrating the potential of each to influence the others or have combined effects on identity and morale. However, each influence may not be weighted the same. For example, our skill sets and identity may influence others' perceptions and thereby shape the professional context over time, but the institutional context (e.g. organisational structures, strong existing expectations) may limit this shaping or be a stronger pull in the other direction. Likewise, the organisational context will also shape professional development opportunities (either informally or formally); however, our own identities, experience and relationships can conversely influence our ability to initiate and self-seek informal professional development opportunities.



While our framework offers a theoretical lens to consider dilemmas and opportunities for third space TEL roles, McIntosh and Nutt (2022) discuss practical strategies to supporting third space roles, such as: recognising expertise, tackling barriers and misconceptions, supporting professional development, and reward and recognition for career development. Their suggestions echo many of our reflections, and when taken alongside our framework, offer early ideas for managers on how to support third space roles.

Our ethnographic reflective accounts have shown role overlaps to be a paradox that can impact agency, which can affect wellbeing and morale. Through considering role ambiguity and overlaps across teams, managers may look at ways to advocate for and support these roles in navigating the complexities of organisational terrains for hopefully improved productivity and employee wellbeing.

### ***Final thoughts***

Our accounts demonstrate and offer insights into dilemmas and professional tensions for practitioners navigating third space territories. While our reflections do not cover the breadth of third space, our synthesised collaborative ethnographic narrative is one that offers perspectives not included to date on commonalities, challenges and affordances for overlapping third space TEL roles. Such perspectives may also be relevant to other third space roles such as learning developers and librarians, who not only work with third space TEL roles regularly but may also share commonalities in the way their work and teams are organised.

Our framework highlights the interplay between relationships, organisational context and career development, and their potential effects on third space roles' identity, influence, agency, wellbeing and morale. The framework offers ideas for managers and third space professionals to reconsider third space identity, and notes considerations for managers when coordinating broader projects, work streams and diverse third-space collaborative teams. The framework may help some third space workers make sense of their own experience as a first step to advocating for their needs. Managers could potentially use the framework as a lens to reframe issues they may be seeing of employee morale, for

increased insight. The framework could also be used practically between third space workers and managers to guide professional development conversations.

As third space is a dynamic, ever shifting space, we advocate for continued research, particularly to expand knowledge of organisational structures for our roles as this is an area understudied so far. We welcome opportunities to refine and validate our framework with the community.

## **Acknowledgements**

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

## **References**

- Altena, S., Ng, R., Hinze, M., Poulsen, S. and Parrish, D. (2019) "Many hats one heart": a scoping review on the professional identity of learning designers', in Y.W Chew, K.M. Chan, and A. Alphonso (eds) *Personalised Learning. Diverse Goals. One Heart. Proceedings ASCILITE 2019: 36<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education*. Singapore University of Social Sciences, Singapore 2-5 December. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2019.284>
- Baré, E., Beard, J., Marshman, I. and Tjia, T. (2021) 'Does the COVID-19 emergency create an opportunity to reform the Australian university workforce?', *Fellow Voices*, Available at: <https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/publications2/fellow-voices/evolving-australian-university-workforce> (Accessed: 15 November 2024).
- Bell, C. (2023) "Career Chameleons", celebrating third space professionalism and squiggly career paths', *Third Space Perspectives - Exploring Integrated Practice*, 19 June. Available at: <https://www.thirdspaceperspectives.com/blog/8c7s6rqi8o0lu2fszpteflpck92h9w> (Accessed: 15 November 2024).

Bellaby, A. and Sankey, M. (2020) 'Educational designers: a sure hope and anchor amid a global pandemic', *ASCILITE Technology Enhanced Learning Blog*, 25 September. Available at: <https://blog.ascilite.org/educational-designers-a-sure-hope-and-anchor-amid-a-global-pandemic> (Accessed: 12 December 2023).

Bickle, E., Allen, S. and Mayer, M. (2022) 'Learning development 2030', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (25). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi25.972>

Bickle, E., Bishopp-Martin, S., Canton, U., Chin, P., Johnson, I., Kantcheva, R., Nodder, J., Rafferty, V et al. (2021) 'Emerging from the third space chrysalis: experiences in a non-hierarchical, collaborative research community of practice', *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 18(7), pp.135-158. Available at: <https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/item/8zw54/emerging-from-the-third-space-chrysalis-experiences-in-a-non-hierarchical-collaborative-research-community-of-practice> (Accessed: 26 November 2024).

Bishopp-Martin, S., Canton, U., McKay, J., Psaros, C., Syska, A. and Thomas, S. (2023) 'Mentoring in learning development', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (29). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi29.1132>

Campbell, K., Schwier, R.A. and Kenny, R.F. (2005) 'Agency of the instructional designer: moral coherence and transformative social practice', *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 21(2), pp.242-262. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.1337>

Connelly, F.M. and Clandinin, D.J. (1990) 'Stories of experience and narrative inquiry', *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), pp.2-14. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0013189X019005002>

Engeström, Y., Engeström, R. and Kärkkäinen, M. (1995) 'Polycontextuality and boundary crossing in expert cognition: learning and problem solving in complex work activities', *Learning and Instruction*, 5(4), pp.319-336. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0959-4752\(95\)00021-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0959-4752(95)00021-6)

- Fyffe, J.M. (2018) 'Getting comfortable with being uncomfortable: a narrative account of becoming an academic developer', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 23(4), pp.355-366. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2018.1496439>
- Latour, B. (1996) 'On actor-network theory. A few clarifications plus more than a few complications', *Soziale Welt*, 47(4), pp.369-381. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40878163> (Accessed: 12 December 2023).
- Little, D. and Green, D.A. (2012) 'Betwixt and between: academic developers in the margins', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 17(3), pp.203-215. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2012.700895>
- McIntosh, E. and Nutt, D. (2022) 'Blended professionals: how to make the most of "third space" experts', *THE Campus*, 18 May. Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/blended-professionals-how-make-most-third-space-experts> (Accessed: 15 November 2024).
- McKay, F. and Robson, J. (2023) "'Structured agency", normalising power, and third space workers: higher education professional services staff as regulatory policy actors', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47(5), pp.633-646. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2177526>
- Meyer, J.H.F. and Land, R. (2005) 'Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning', *Higher Education*, 49(3), pp.373-388. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-6779-5>
- Mitchell, K., Simpson, C. and Adachi, C. (2017) 'What's in a name: the ambiguity and complexity of technology enhanced learning roles', in H. Partridge, K. Davis, and J. Thomas (eds) *Me, Us, IT! Proceedings ASCILITE 2017: 34th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education*. University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia 4-6 December, pp.147-151. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2017.759>

- Mossman, M. (2023) 'What's in a name? study skills? academic skills? academic literacies? Does it really matter and to whom does it matter?', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (29). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi29.1143>
- Muncey, T. (2010) *Creating Autoethnographies*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Obexer, R. (2022) 'Lost in third space: identity work of a "blended professional" in higher education', *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*, 2(3), pp.467-483. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.14771617>
- Poulos, C.N. (2012) 'Introduction: the memory/voice/journey/call of autoethnography', *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 5(3), pp.293-294. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2012.5.3.29>
- Poulos, C.N. (2017) 'Autoethnography: a manifeStory', *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 10(1), pp.33-38. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2017.10.1.33>
- Poulos, C.N. (2021) *Essentials of Autoethnography*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Sage, J. and Sankey, M. (2021) 'Managing career transitions into post-secondary learning designer jobs: an Australasian perspective', in S. Gregory, S. Warburton and M. Schier (eds) *Back to the Future. Proceedings ASCILITE 2021: 38<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education*. University of New England, Australia 29 November – 1 December. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.14742/ascilite2021.0103>
- Schwier, R.A., Campbell, K. and Kenny, R.F. (2007) 'Instructional designers' perceptions of their agency: tales of change and community', in M.J. Keppell (ed) *Instructional Design: Case Studies in Communities of Practice*. IGI Global, pp.1-18. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-59904-322-7>

- Slade, C., McGrath, D. Greenaway, R. and Parker, J. (2019) 'Challenges in sustaining technology enhanced learning: recruitment, employment and retention of learning designers in Australian universities', in Y.W Chew, K.M. Chan, and A. Alphonso (eds) *Personalised Learning. Diverse Goals. One Heart. Proceedings ASCILITE 2019: 36<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education*. Singapore University of Social Sciences, Singapore 2-5 December. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2019.274>
- Slay, H.S. and Smith, D.A. (2011) 'Professional identity construction: using narrative to understand the negotiation of professional and stigmatized cultural identities', *Human Relations*, 64(1), pp.85-107. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726710384290>
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 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. (2013) *Reconstructing Identities in Higher Education: the rise of Third Space professionals*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Whitchurch, C. (2015) 'The rise of third space professionals: paradoxes and dilemmas', in U. Teichler and W.C. Cummings (eds) *Forming, Recruiting and Managing the Academic Profession*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp.79-99.
- Whitchurch, C. (2017) 'Professional staff identities in higher education', in J.C. Shin and P. Teixeira (eds) *Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions*. Dordrecht: Springer. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1\\_302-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_302-1)

White, S. (2023) 'Generating threshold concepts for impactful learning development: exploring a new perspective on our work', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (29). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi29.1101>

## **Author details**

Kate Mitchell is a senior learning designer at the University of Melbourne. She has research interests in third space roles, ePortfolios, instructional design and equity in online learning.

Kashmira Dave is a lecturer in Academic Development at the University of New England. She has 20 years' collective experience in learning and teaching in higher education across professional and academic roles. Kashmira has research interests in learning design and learning and teaching in higher education.

Meredith Hinze is manager of eLearning/eTeaching at the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Arts, specialised in learning design with technology, innovative pedagogies, and the application of technology-enhanced learning. Her research focuses on professional identity and the role of the learning designer/learning technologist.

Alex Tsirgialos is a senior learning designer at the University of Melbourne leading educational change initiatives in Health and Fine Arts. He holds research interests in third space roles and learning design leadership.

## **Licence**

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



## ***Appendix: detailed prompts for reflection***

The following contains a sample of prompts for reflection collaboratively negotiated by the authors, used as a base to develop autoethnographic reflections. Prompts are adapted from Whitchurch (2015), which sit alongside additional prompts generated by us through discussion and negotiation, with reference to the literature (e.g. Obexer, 2022) and our own anecdotal experience. Prompts were then sorted into relevant themes.

1. **Professional career/identity:** perception of role and identity
  - 1.1. Background – experience and history - How did you become a third space professional or ‘blended professional’ in the third space?
  - 1.2. How do you see yourself in relation to your role? Were there critical turning points in your career?
  - 1.3. How do you describe/classify your role – what makes you a third space professional (or blended/unbounded/etc professional in third space?)
  - 1.4. How do you construct and navigate your professional identity based on these contexts? How do you conceive of/perceive of your identity? Are there points of identity conflict?
  - 1.5. Your role and positionality in relation to other third space roles/TEL roles?
  - 1.6. Credentials and careers, knowledges (institutional and practice knowledges), skills, translational role/abilities
  - 1.7. Diversity of interests, specialisations, motivations.
  
2. **Professional relationships:** key interfaces, representation of third space TEL roles, perceptions of/from others
  - 2.1. Who do you interact with and in what ways? e.g. academic staff, other professional staff, students, wider networks (within vs outside the University); What do these relationships look like?
  - 2.2. Were/are there any areas of overlap?
  - 2.3. In what ways are you recognised and/or valued (or not) by others? What does this mean for your sense of identity and ‘legitimacies’?
  - 2.4. whom did they regard as their peer group; in what ways did they perceive that they were valued?
  - 2.5. What ‘languages’ and other communication or relationship differences are you aware of? If observed, how do you navigate spaces of different

professional 'languages'? (e.g. what does this mean for people and client oriented approaches)

3. **Professional influence:** experience of being managed, experience of managing others, organisational structures, decision making/autonomy, Perception/experience of recognition – difference in internal or external to team
  - 3.1. How is/was your voice heard; in what ways do/did you have influence; was this formal or informal; where do you see yourself belonging?
  - 3.2. To what extent are you involved in decision making, risk, innovation/development? Are there conflicts of interest? What are your experiences in decision-making and how are you treated in decision-making spaces?
  - 3.3. To what extent are you involved in working with external agencies?
  - 3.4. Do you see yourself as a leader and if so, in what ways do you exercise leadership?
  - 3.5. How have you as a manager been able to effectively support and advise others (line reports but may include other adjacent teams)? What are the opportunities and limitations to this? What kind of support have you noticed is required (e.g. mental health in 3rd space professions).
  
4. **Professional development:** including career progression
  - 4.1. Where do you see yourself going in relation to your career? What steps are you taking to progress this?
  - 4.2. What do you see as your key development needs?
  - 4.3. Career paths – possibilities of movement within/around/outside the sector (and/or conversely, lack thereof)? Are you contemplating moving out of higher education?
  - 4.4. How does scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) factor into your work and how do you navigate research and scholarship?
  
5. **Professional context:** organisational structures and 'the institutional interface'
  - 5.1. What is the broader professional landscape, politics, organisational context you work within?
  - 5.2. Organisational structures and hierarchies you work within/have worked within, including:

- 5.2.1. *Settings* (central/faculty models, corporate or Online Program Management (OPM) companies, others);
- 5.2.2. *Structures* (service vs. Partnership models, flat vs hierarchical structures, informal and other ways of getting things done);
- 5.2.3. *Motivation and incentives*
- 5.3. Intention, agency, input and consultation by the organisation around setting up structures and roles (the way our roles are considered/hired/strategically directed by the institution from the start)
  - 5.3.1. Was the structure design deliberate or fluid/accidental?
  - 5.3.2. Do you have agency or input to shape the role vs. be shaped by organisation/work?
  - 5.3.3. Positional relationality to other teams/roles, e.g. consultation and decision-making around role scope for similar/competing teams.
- 5.4. Organisational structures that you think may help/hinder 3rd space professional ways of working.