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People, Partnerships and Pedagogies

Forging the path in the third space: Opportunities and challenges for Learning Designers in Higher Education

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This concise paper explores the role of learning designers as third-space professionals in higher education, exploring both their self-perception and the perceptions held by other professionals in the sector. Learning designers play a crucial role in learning support, program design, web-based learning, and industry partnerships, being also able to challenge traditional practices and enhance student experiences and outcomes. However, a comprehensive understanding of their roles remains complex and necessitates further exploration. The challenges faced by learning designers include ambiguous role definitions and the delicate balance of meeting diverse stakeholder expectations. Through an autoethnographic approach, members from an ASCILITE Community Mentoring Program group offer insights into the multifaceted contributions of learning designers. Recognizing, working collaboratively with, and appreciating the diverse expertise of learning designers are key factors for universities to effectively address recent societal changes and meet the evolving needs of their students.

Keywords: third-space professionals, learning designers, higher education, role definition

Introduction

One aspect of higher education (HE) that has garnered much recent interest is the notion of third-space professionals. There have long been discussions about the importance of the 'third space' (that is, not research and not teaching, but some other area of focus, sometimes conceptualised as public or community engagement) for universities and society as a whole. This discussion has often considered the need for universities to engage with industry and the wider community, and these discussions have taken on an added urgency as universities operate under straitened financial arrangements and are required to, more clearly, justify their contribution to society.

More recently, the discussion has focused on the workers within these spaces and how they negotiate the challenges and leverage the opportunities that are present therein. It should be noted that the terms 'third-space' and 'third-space professionals' are still poorly defined, and different institutions have implemented different approaches to make use of these workers. In some cases, there are centralised teams (for example, teaching and learning teams, that are made up of third space professionals); in other settings, there are faculty or extra-faculty groupings, with a specific goal. While recognising the diversity of roles and positions that make up the third-space professional domain, this paper has chosen to focus on a narrow interpretation of that space: the role of learning designers and similar within universities. The term 'learning designer' is also not without controversy; again, exploring that is beyond the scope of this concise paper, so we have adopted an inclusive definition. When the term learning designer is used in this paper, we refer to those HE professionals responsible for liaising with academic staff and designing and developing learning experiences for students (either online or not). People in these roles have been described as educational designers, instructional designers, learning designers and other, similar terms. We will use 'learning designers' ('LDs') for simplicity's sake.

In particular, we are interested in exploring how LDs negotiate the terrain of the third space. There has been some research into this already that has sought to define the boundaries of this third space and to categorise the kinds of roles in which third space professionals and teams might work (Whitchurch, 2012; McIntosh & Nutt, 2022); however, to date, there has been relatively little interest paid to how LDs experience that work, nor to how other HE workers perceive the role of LDs in this space. And this is what this paper seeks to address. Emerging from an ASCILITE Community Mentoring Program group, this paper's authors offer insider and outsider accounts of their understanding of LDs in the third space. This multivocal approach presents a unique picture of the way LDs are filling a role, even as universities adapt to changing circumstances.

Literature review

Perhaps the most influential scholar of the third space within HE is Whitchurch (2012), who used the idea of the third space to describe the emergence of institutional projects across a HE institution that no longer fit neatly into traditional teaching and research categories. Instead, Whitchurch describes a new portfolio of activity populated, in part, by third space professionals. This new portfolio includes ‘projects such as learning support and community and business partnership’ (Whitchurch, 2012, p. 24). Whitchurch specifically identifies some of the work typically undertaken by LDs in the learning support category: program design and development, and web-based learning. Increasingly, too, LDs also work as part of the link between the university and industry - through community and business partnerships. For example, many universities have employed LDs to help develop enterprise learning courses or microcredentials for business partners. In this setting, LDs work at the intersection of teaching and research, but they are also interfacing with the community; thought must be given as to whether this is a new space, or simply a combination of different old spaces.

The importance of the workers in these spaces should not be underestimated. While the roles are hard to describe, and are sometimes overlooked, some scholars (Hicks, 2005) identified that those in these spaces were often capable of acting as ‘change agents’, even as they were caught between competing agendas. Hall makes a similar point when she writes, ‘The third space professional is formed by being excluded from traditional activity but in being excluded, they are described as particularly well placed to critique dominant practices and disrupt cultures that inhibit change or effective student learning’ (2022, p.29). This paper develops both ideas below.

Speaking more broadly than just LDs, Whitchurch notes that the roles in these spaces are ‘imprecisely articulated and understood in relation to institutional settings and organisational frameworks’ (2012, p. 25). This observation is also noted by Whitchurch (2012, p. 26), who noted that ‘Learning technologists, also, have moved from roles that primarily offer technical support and problem-solving to roles that contribute to curriculum design and delivery, requiring an understanding of different types of learning programme, and ways in which these can be delivered most effectively in a virtual environment’. The imprecise language is also acknowledged by McIntosh & Nutt (2022), who suggest that the term third-space professional has, in some way, been conflated with other recent terms, including blended professional, integrated practitioner, dual professional, pracademic.

As a result of this, and writing during the COVID-19 pandemic, McIntosh & Nutt (2022) argue that the situation originally described by Whitchurch has become even more urgent. They write, ‘within the context of an increasingly massified, diversified, and globalised higher education landscape, we now face new, ongoing, and unprecedented disruptions which warrant even further investigation into the nature and identity of professionals who work in this way, and the profound impact that they have on the sector’ (2012, p. 2).

Methodology

This paper adopts an autoethnographic methodological approach. Autoethnography is a well-known approach to qualitative research that effectively combines autobiography with ethnography. In doing so, it seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2010).

In a traditional autobiography, the author retroactively selects and writes about past experiences. These past experiences have been selected, not just because they have meaning for the author, but also because the author is suggesting they are of value to the reader too. Ethnography attempts to study a culture and its practices and beliefs, to assist people not of that culture to understand it. One common way of doing this is by seeking to become a participant in that culture. Autoethnography, then, combines both approaches. According to Ellis et al. (2010, p. 274), autoethnographers retrospectively and selectively ‘write about epiphanies that stem from, made possible by, being part of a culture and possessing a cultural identity.’

However, this research goes further than a singular autoethnography. Instead, it presents five shortened accounts that offer different perspectives about the role of LDs as third-space professionals. These five accounts come from the members of an ASCILITE Community Mentoring Project group, made up of three mentors and two mentees. Members wrote short reflective commentaries as the group met and shared ideas around these topics. These became the basis for the vignettes presented below. The deliberate inclusion of multiple voices - and different viewpoints - serves to create a more complex picture of the role of the LD in a modern university.

The study did not require ethical approval as the level of risk was deemed negligible. However, prior to collecting and analyzing data, all participants (who are also the authors of the paper) provided informed consent. Additionally, consent was obtained for the publication of their data and identification.

Findings

Participant 1 – Beto (Robert)

Beto is an educational psychologist who focuses his research on the application of digital pedagogies. He teaches education courses. In the past he worked as a lecturer in higher education in American universities.

I believe we are on the verge of an educational change which has been needed for years. The advancements in technology are providing students with different access to content and different ways of producing content. The technological advancements that students and faculty can use to aid the learning process are forcing the field of education to change radically. Faculty need to interact with each other, LDs, and students differently to learn new educational trends. In addition, faculty need to revamp pedagogies and assessments based on the new technological advancements. This is going to cause education to update their practices in ways that have been needed for years.

One way faculty can grow with technology is through communities of practice and special interest groups who comprise LDs as a key technological ally. Faculty can use technology to develop relationships and partnerships with faculty and LDs at other universities to stay abreast of changes and to share ways to address the changes occurring in education. As technology advances, the need for faculty to develop communities and groups who discuss and develop procedures to address the changes in education is never more important.

Participant 2 – Bruna

Bruna is a Digital Accessibility Specialist and has worked as a learning designer in higher education at different universities in the ACT.

Society is changing at an unprecedented pace, and so are the needs of our current students. Universities are also undergoing massive changes to adjust and adapt to these needs. The rapid shift to online and hybrid modes during the COVID-19 pandemic also contributed to this demand for change. This scenario amplified the need for (the already much-needed but often underappreciated) professionals specialised in learning and teaching, the LDs. The growth of third-space professionals happened so fast that academics and LDs alike are still trying to understand the limits and scope of their roles.

This situation, understandably, causes confusion and sometimes tensions between academics and LDs. Having been in the learning design space myself, I know some of these tensions came from academics questioning our abilities to assist them and understand the HE landscape, as quite a few of us don't have qualifications such as a PhD. But, overall, confusion and the need for more awareness about what we do were the main barriers to effective collaborative work.

I think that there is an immense body of work to be done if we want our universities to address society's and our student's needs, and I strongly believe that having academics (subject-matter experts) and LDs (learning and teaching experts) working collaboratively is a great way of getting us there. At the end of the day, we both want the same thing when we think about learning and teaching in HE. We want to provide our students with equitable, accessible and effective learning experiences that meet their needs and access requirements and equip them with the tools required to actively participate in society.

Participant 3 – Ha

Ha is a first-year PhD student doing a research project on teachers' technology practice with English as an Additional Language students at Australian primary schools. Before starting her PhD she also did her Master's at an Australian university.

My experiences with LDs have been quite limited in the sense that I don't work directly with them. But rather, I consider myself a 'consumer' of their work. Back when I was doing my Masters during COVID, despite knowing very little about how HE in Australia operationalizes, I did suspect that the courses offered on my university's Learning Management System couldn't have been developed by my lecturers alone. Now I understand that they are the results of the collaborative efforts of academics and LDs, and while LDs often work in the background, what they do has a profound impact on my learning experiences.

I believe that LDs have a very important role to play in universities, and we students benefit from their work every day. As a PhD student, I enjoy enrolling in self-paced and online courses that help me cultivate a skillset needed for my PhD and life after it. I am aware that the third space is becoming more contested now that catering for students' diverse needs is a priority in response to a changing society. Students nowadays, myself included, prefer learning experiences that are flexible, accessible, relevant and authentic to our working contexts. These mounting demands are presenting enormous challenges for LDs to tackle.

I find the role of an LD resonating with my professional interest in that it's all about what's best for the students. Regardless of whether I'll be working as an academic or an LD, I believe it's essential to establish a mutually trusting relationship between academics and LDs, from which our students can receive the best learning experiences that HE has to offer.

Participant 4 – James

James is a teaching-focused academic currently coordinating several units of study relating to molecular biology and genetics. He has completed a higher degree in education, and leads teaching and learning communities of practice within his school.

My experiences with LDs have been very mixed. In principle, I see them as an asset to improving the quality of teaching and learning within institutions. Particularly for helping university academics design and coordinate units of study who would not otherwise be engaged with any model of pedagogy. However, I also see tension within my own institution as to the role of LDs and how they engage with academic departments. Part of this tension in my own context comes from the more recent advent of my own role, that of the teaching or education-focused academic.

Teaching-focused academics are generally expected to help bridge the gap between disciplinary expertise and scholarly teaching practice. In my area, there has sometimes been a low opinion of LDs expressed, or at least their organisational unit. I think this opinion stems from a lack of understanding regarding our seemingly overlapping areas of activity. My experiences have not included any close collaborations with LDs, and this is a strange thing to note given our shared goal in improving teaching practice.

Participant 5 – Keith

Keith is a balanced academic. He teaches a course on learning design. In the past he worked as a learning designer in higher education at a number of different universities.

I think universities are under so much pressure - and from so many different sources. Firstly, students are increasingly demanding a better learning experience - more engagement, more flexibility, more value for their money - and that's something that I think they're fully entitled to. But there's not as much money, so universities are looking for ways to do more with less. That's all led to lots of change - such as teaching focused academics, but especially with the growth of LDs. I think LDs have become so important, so integral to university education so quickly that many academics are still struggling to understand where they fit in. Sometimes, that can lead to conflict - LDs have a role to do, and that might mean making sure that a site meets accessibility standards, for example, but that might put off an academic who doesn't understand or doesn't respond to requests for meetings. And that's not laziness on the academic's part, mostly - they're very busy people too!

I think the way it might end up is that there's less centralised control for academics about subjects. That is, it's no longer Dr X's or Professor Y's subject. Instead, I think courses and subjects will be managed by teams - LDs, analysts, media producers and academics - all of whom will work together to craft the learning experience. That would be a significant change in power, though, so it might well be resisted.

Discussion

This study sheds light on the vital role learning designers play as third-space professionals in higher education. These professionals are in a complex position, caught between academics and traditional professional staff, as they contribute to diverse areas such as learning support, program design, web-based learning, and industry partnerships. Despite their key role in enhancing learning and teaching experiences, there is still a lack of clear understanding and definition of their roles. As highlighted in the above vignettes, ambiguity in role definitions is often the cause of confusion and tensions among stakeholders, particularly between learning designers and academics.

Additionally, due to being often situated on the outside and excluded from traditional activities, learning designers have a unique opportunity to critically assess and disrupt the current higher education system. And so, as identified by our participants, they have the potential to act as change agents, driving innovation and challenging established practices, which are essential in meeting the evolving demands of students and society.

This study highlights the importance of establishing clear role definitions for learning designers. Clear roles are essential for creating relationships of trust, fostering effective collaboration and maximizing the contributions of these professionals within the higher education sector.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper highlights the critical role of learning designers as third-space professionals in higher education and examines their self-perception and perceptions from others in the sector. The challenges posed by ambiguous role definitions and diverse stakeholder expectations emphasise the need for ongoing research to fully understand their multifaceted contributions. While the autoethnographic approach used by the authors provides valuable insights, there are still many aspects of learning designers' roles that remain unexplored. Given this, thorough exploration and research are pivotal for understanding the impact of learning designers as third-space professionals and effectively utilizing their expertise to meet the evolving needs of students and society. Embracing this emerging research area will contribute to the advancement of educational practices and enhance the overall learning experience for present and future generations.

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