Boundaryless practice? In search of space/s in higher education.

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Published works submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy on the Basis of Published Work.

May 2024

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i. List of published works

Ref No.	Details of the Published Work	Type	Digital Object Identifier
1	Dickinson, J., & Griffiths, T. L. (2017). Building bridges: A critical analysis of university–industry collaboration to improve diverse access to elite professions. *Industry and Higher Education*, *31*(4), 227-238.	Peer-reviewed journal article	https://doi.org/10.1177/0950422217707641
2	Dickinson, J., Fowler, A., & Griffiths, T. L. (2020). Pracademics? Exploring transitions and professional identities in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-15.	Peer-reviewed journal article	https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1744123
3	Dickinson, J., Griffiths, T. L., & Bredice, A. (2021). 'It's just another thing to think about': encouraging students' engagement in extracurricular activities. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *45*(6), 744-757.	Peer-reviewed journal article	https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1813263
4	Griffiths, T. L., Dickinson, J., & Day, C. J. (2021). Exploring the relationship between extracurricular activities and student self-efficacy within university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *45*(9), 1294-1309.	Peer-reviewed journal article	https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1951687
5	Griffiths, T. L., Dickinson, J., & Fletcher, A. (2021). A case study of student learning spaces during the pandemic; a sociomateriality perspective. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, *9*(2), 77-81.	Peer-reviewed journal article	https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v9i2.474
6	Dickinson, J., Griffiths, T. and Austen, L. (2022) Collaborative methodological reflection: Disrupting the ethical practices of a creative method in higher education research. *Social Research Practice.*	Peer-reviewed journal article	https://the-sra.org.uk/common/Uploaded%20files/Social%20Research%20Practice%20Journal/social-research-practice-journal-issue-12-spring-2022.pdf
7	Griffiths, T.L., & Dickinson, J. (2023) The value of objects: how artefacts can enrich professional reflection and reflexivity. In Dickinson Jill and Teri-Lisa Griffiths (Eds): Professional Development in Academia: Pracademia	Chapter in an edited collection	https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-33746-8_9
8	Griffiths, T.L., Dickinson, J., and Kellock, A. (2022) Supporting Multidisciplinary Transitions to the Blended Environment: Innovations and Challenges for Lecturers. In Golam Jamil and Dawn A. Morley (Eds): Agile Learning Environments amid Disruption	Chapter in an edited collection	https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92979-4_9

Table 1: Each output with assigned Ref. no (herein referred to as R1, R2, etc.), full APA reference, type of publication, and digital object identifier (DOI)

ii. Abstract

This work explores the significance of spaces for learning. Focussing on the higher education context, spatial theory and cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) are employed to address the following research questions: 1. What is the significance of space to professional identity and career development? 2. How can engagement in atypical learning spaces inform the relevance of spatial theory in education and professional development? 3. How can creative methods support researchers to understand the significance of space and materiality in learning?

The collected works in this appraisal employ qualitative and mixed methodologies to explore participants' perceptions of their experience in the context of the spaces they occupy. Recognising that the impact of space is often obscured or ignored by users, creative methodologies are applied in several of the submitted works to bring space and materiality to the forefront.

The theories employed in analysis have been selected due to their relevance to the higher education context. CHAT is applied to both the experiences of staff transitioning to academia and students engaging with extracurricular activities to explore how collective cultural understandings within universities influence the practice of those within them. Spatiality theories are applied to staff and student experiences of teaching and learning during the pandemic to consider the multifaceted nature of encounters within spaces and acknowledge the embodied nature of learning and development.

This work contributes to understanding of the significance of materiality in the higher education context and the ways in which human experience permeates physical spaces and influences practice in varied settings.

1. Overview

I. Introduction and context

The relationships between space/s and learning practice are the focus of this work. Space holds a curious place within higher education, whilst there are strong cultural spatial symbols universities have become increasingly porous. Political intervention has increased the diversity of the student population, proliferated the number of higher education institutions, and centred outcomes and metrics for measuring performance in a marketized sector. Through a focus on spatiality theory and with the aim of interrogating 'conceptions of inside (classroom, school) and outside (home, community)', this work will explore the 'relational set of practices and mobilities' that influence practice within universities (Fenwick et al., 2011, p. 152). In doing so, the influence of external contexts on learning practice within universities will be elucidated across three areas of enquiry. First, the influence of industry and practitioner contexts on university teaching via the recruitment of pracademics (R2; R7). Second, student engagement with extracurricular activities and the influence on their conceptualisation of learning (R1; R3; R4). Third, the development of teaching and learning practice away from campus spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic (R5; R8). This appraisal will also present a methodological contribution, considering how creative methods can illuminate material concerns, including the ethical implications of such an approach (R6).

The contribution of this work is threefold. Firstly, it augments theoretical perspectives offered by sociomateriality. Secondly, it develops methodological approaches that support a consideration of material components. Thirdly, it provides empirical evidence that progresses concepts of learning spaces. The studies presented in this appraisal take a multi-disciplinary standpoint, presenting research with students and academics from a range of disciplines, enabling a consideration of commonalities in practices across the university. The definition of professional learning operationalised in this work is deliberately broad, to include the pre-career stage of the undergraduate degree where significant career socialisation activities occur such as mentoring (Waymer et al., 2018), engagement with professional networking (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021), and the accumulation of cultural capital (Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2022). Similarly, the definition of learning spaces utilised in this appraisal is of a place beyond the traditional 'container' of the physical classroom. This approach not only acknowledges the increasing role of technology in learning practices and the subsequent expansion and elasticity of learning space (Thomas, 2010), but also aims to develop existing knowledge of the 'complex, shifting assemblages involving human beings and things: material, digital and hybrid' that make up learning spaces (Ellis and Goodyear, 2016, p. 150).

The structure of the work is as follows. Next, the research questions to be addressed in this appraisal are outlined. Then, I define the ontological and epistemological positions of my research before offering an analysis of each submitted output. Here, I explore the context of each output and the significant contributions of the work. Section three synthesises the

contribution to knowledge that the portfolio of works makes. Here, I explore three themes: professional learning in liminal spaces; educational practice in atypical spaces; and creative methods and the material 'insider'. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the contribution and consider the ongoing development of my research.

II. Research questions

The critical appraisal addresses three research questions. These are presented below, in Table 2, and mapped against each research output listed in the published works section (see page 3).

Research question	Corresponding output
1. What is the significance of space to professional learning and career development?	R2, R5, R6, R7, R8
2. How can practice in atypical learning spaces inform the relevance of spatial theory in education and professional learning?	R1, R2, R4, R5, R7, R8
3. How can creative methods support researchers to understand the significance of space and materiality in learning?	R1, R2, R3, R4, R7

III. Methodology

i. Research paradigm

The ontological position of this work is focused on social reality as constructed by the amalgamation of human and non-human actors; the works submitted as part of this critical appraisal all focus on practice and the influence of materiality. Later publications specifically consider sociomateriality, which challenges the ontological assumption of the separation between social and technological (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008), through a 'relational place-practice' ontology (Acton, 2017, p.1442). In education, this assumption is historically and culturally manifest in several ways. First, the transmission of knowledge from a teacher to the learner/s. This idea of decontextualised knowledge acquisition is integrated with legitimisation of specific, but ultimately limiting, forms of knowledge (Sawchuk, 2003, cited in Fenwick et al., 2011). Second, assumptions of learning spaces as conservative (located in designated places) and fixed. Alternatively, technology (broadly interpreted as objects, tools, and material spaces) adapts to and influences human action, which results in collaborative, continuous, and emergent practice (Fenwick, 2015). Each output within this collection of works considers learning practice, including professional and reflexive learning contexts, and the influence of space on these practices.

Furthermore, the philosophical position of this work is informed by critical realism. Taking up Fryer's (2022b) model of a research design informed by a critical realist perspective, he posits that such projects must seek to explore causal mechanisms of the phenomena in focus, unless

they are exploratory in nature. All outputs within this work (except for R3) pursue the causal mechanisms that influence events and experiences. This stratified ontology, where experiences, events, and causal mechanisms are distinct but interrelated enables qualitative researchers to engage in explanatory research (Archer et al., 1999).

ii. Positionality

Taking up the framework offered by sociomateriality, to factor the spatial, technological, and material influences on the 'content and process of learning' (Fenwick, 2015, p. 83), and to respond to calls to understand 'who is doing the questioning' (Archer et al., 1999, p. 15), I will consider my positionality and its influence on my research approach. My conceptualisation of learning is informed by 'lifespace' learning theory, where learning is a lifelong project which occurs through both formal and informal activity (Harris and Chisholm, 2011). This perspective aligns with my professional values. In my previous profession, I trained and worked as a careers adviser, supporting clients with their work and education choices. In my current role, I take a relational constructivist approach to my teaching practice, considering how to encourage participation when designing and delivering active learning experiences. In the field of career development, integrated theories have emerged that seek to articulate the uncertainty typifying post-industrial working life (Chen, 2003; Sterner, 2012). Sterner (2012) outlines an argument for existentialist therapeutic approaches within career counselling that focus on meaning and value, rather than only skills and attributes, for clients seeking to make career decisions. Similarly, a focus on meaning and value is evident within the research presented in this appraisal as a reaction to some of the contemporary instrumental and performative framing of the value of universities to society (Fryer, 2022a; Gourlay, 2022b). Through the exploration of practice within atypical spaces, this work considers the impact of informal activity on formal learning structures. Fenwick (2015) highlights that one of the critiques of informal learning is the lack of analysis of the impact of power relations. Through an explicit analysis of the macro power dynamics within learning situations, my work contributes to addressing this critique.

iii. Case study research

The published works employ case study methods, corresponding with the aim of each study to facilitate a temporal, contextual, and detailed explanation of phenomena (Gillham, 2000). Case study methods may still work towards providing explanatory outcomes (Easton, 2010), and are particularly useful for exploring phenomena with clear boundaries, such as research within organisations (Ackroyd, 2009; Easton, 2010). However, as my aim is to investigate the influence of the external context and the porous boundaries of universities, it is necessary to include events and causal mechanisms both during the analysis (Fryer, 2022a) and when positing questions, which should be structured to consider 'What caused the events associated with the phenomena to occur?' (Easton, 2010, p. 123). Accordingly, Ackroyd (2009) describes abductive,

discovery-focussed research as ‘combining the ideas of participants; with recognition of the powers and tendencies of other entities, to describe a generative process’ (p. 538).

iv. Methodological contribution

The use of creative methods was influenced by both the context of each study and my research aims. Although more traditional qualitative approaches would have produced useful data, creative methods enabled participants to explore the material contexts of the phenomena under investigation. Sayer states that critical realists assume that ‘the world is differentiated and stratified, consisting not only of events, but objects, including structures, which have powers and liabilities capable of generating events’ (1994, p.5). To be able to generate data that explored the interaction between structure and agency, participants needed to be guided away from simply describing events.

Furthermore, my use of creative methods has demonstrated how insider researchers may mitigate some bias through participant/researcher co-creation of concepts, focus, and data generation. However, researchers employing creative methods must also be aware of the ethical circumstances such an approach can generate. The structured ethical reflections reported in R6 demonstrated how researchers can employ a relational approach to ethics. This led to establishing a peer reflection practice for research ethics within my institution. The goal was two-fold, to support researchers with making successful research ethics applications and to increase opportunities for varied methodological discussions amongst colleagues. This practice will be reported in a future output.

2. Analysis of component parts

I. R1

This paper investigates the relationship between universities and industry in the context of widening participation to the legal sector. Elite law firms recruit around 95% of their graduate entrants from Russell Group universities (People in Law, 2022). The focus of this paper was an evaluation of an initiative aimed at students from a post-92 university[1]. Students were invited to attend an insight day at a Magic Circle law firm following a tour of the Royal Courts of Justice. Drawing on Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy development, 'due to its emphasis on the impact of a person's social environment', the research explored how this experience had impacted on attendees' self-efficacy for applying to legal graduate schemes (Dickinson & Griffiths, 2017, p. 231). Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in their ability to successfully complete a specific task (Bandura, 1977).

This was my first project following the completion of my master's thesis, which was focussed on professional development and social justice. This project presented a natural progression as it involved similar themes in a different context, specifically how student exposure to professional spaces may influence their career goals. The aim of the research was to investigate the impact of engaging with an insight event, and to explain how the experience of legal settings in London influenced participants' motivation for their studies and long-term career aims. Yet, evidence emerged to show how participants constructed their pre-professional identities through dress (wearing smart attire), practice (taking part in a mock trial, commuting on the Underground), and modelling (noting one lawyer who had similarly attended a post-92 university). These interactions between participants and materiality represented an early manifestation of my interest in this area.

R1 was the first output in a long-term collaboration with Dickinson. Our work involved a shared approach to designing and implementing research projects, including apportioning substantive contributions to all outputs. For this project, I took the lead in developing the focus group schedule, including suggesting the activities for the focus group (see section 3, iii for further detail). I also led the questioning during the focus groups. The reported findings and recommendations were a result of collaborative discussion and shared writing.

Our recommendations included how employers offering competitive graduate schemes could make the environment and their expectations of candidates less opaque, including within materials such as recruitment literature. Furthermore, we suggested that sporadic insight

[1] Post-1992 refers to HEIs in the United Kingdom who were granted university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. This includes both former polytechnic colleges and institutions created since 1992.

events were insufficient for progressing diversity goals and for impacting positively on marginalised candidates' self-efficacy.

The paper was published in *Industry and Higher Education* (CiteScore: 2.3, SJR: 0.404) and has been cited in nine other studies, including a report of existing evidence on reducing equality gaps from Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) (Ramaiah and Robinson, 2022). Most studies citing this paper focus on the recommendation of increasing access to professional spaces to facilitate diversity in the professions.

II. R2

This paper reported research undertaken to investigate the experiences of academic staff with prior professional experience outside of higher education, or 'pracademics' (Volpe and Chandler, 1999). The case study research undertaken for this publication (in collaboration with Dickinson and Fowler), within a post-1992 university with a focus on applied learning, furthered my interests in professional and career development.

I am considered a partial insider in this study, according to Greene's (2014) concept of insider research. Despite sharing an identity with the participants, an academic with a former profession, the research highlighted the significance of varied professional backgrounds on individual epistemological positions (Banks, 1998). Nevertheless, I did hold knowledge of a pracademic role within the case study institution. This knowledge was an advantage for creating affinity with the participants and involved embodying a dual role 'that of researcher and researched' (Greene, 2014, p. 2). One of the limitations of insider research is the potential impact on impartiality. The was mediated through structured reflexive discussions with the other members of the research team, as suggested by Dickinson. The discussions explored our positionality, which we felt was important due to the varied nature of our professional backgrounds and routes into higher education and our status as pracademics. This practice relates to Elliott's (2005) examination of the researcher as narrator. She emphasises the importance of researcher self-awareness through engaging with reflexivity to consider the influence of their identity, and to provide accountability for the decisions made throughout the research process.

The qualitative data was collected via a focus group design. Following a suggestion from one of the research team (Fowler), we also asked participants to bring along an object that they felt represented their transition from practice to academia (detailed in R7). The leading of the focus groups was shared between the research team. Dickinson and I engaged with paired reflexive thematic data analysis of the recorded data, annotating the transcripts separately and discussing the emergent themes.

A major focus on this work was the exploration of the liminal spaces occupied by pracademic staff, and the resultant impact on their professional identity, teaching and research practice, and belonging in academic spaces. This study contributed to an extension of existing debates,

for example Shreeve's (2011) work, focussing on academics who were still in practice part-time and reporting conflict between the two socio-cultural professional contexts and Gourlay's (2011) study of a nursing academic who returns to practice. Amongst the significant findings from this study were the enduring philosophical connections our participants felt to their previous practice, in terms of their professional values. This supported our assertion that the definition of pracademics should be extended to include those who have made the transition to academia full-time. The contribution to original knowledge was the assertion that pracademics were a category of professionals who shared traits across different disciplines, as opposed to previous work that tended towards articulating discipline-specific findings.

This paper was written collaboratively via team discussion, subsequent individual writing, and further team writing sessions. The work was published in *Studies in Higher Education* (CiteScore: 7.2, SJR: 1.565) and it has been cited 78 times in a range of works that similarly explore the role and identity of pracademics internationally (Giladi et al., 2022; Kelly and Rossignol, 2022). The findings of our study have been utilised to develop professional development theory including, imposter syndrome (Mulholland et al., 2022), supporting academic transitions (Kelly and Rossignol, 2022), and the development of communities of practice (Bickle et al., 2021).

III. R3

This was the first of two papers that reported findings from a mixed methods project undertaken to investigate the impact of student engagement with extracurricular activities on their studying practice (using Ellis and Goodyear's (2016) definition of 'studying', as opposed to 'learning', practice to denote the range of activities and tasks that students engage with through their learning role). The project was inspired by the findings from R1, where participants reported feeling more motivated towards their studies because of their engagement with an external organisation. Dickinson and I agreed that this potential connection was worthy of further investigation. The focus of this paper was to report on qualitative research undertaken with 38 students from a range of courses. The case study institution focussed on applied knowledge, had an award-winning careers service, and encouraged student engagement in a range of developmental activities.

A student researcher supported the data collection and analysis and is the third author for this paper. Dickinson et al. (2022) outline some of the benefits of employing students as researchers, including career development, confidence, and community engagement. However, Silva et al. (2004) suggested that although student researchers may serve universities, efficient support into research careers was necessary for long-term benefits to students. Accordant with my career development background, it was important that our student researcher had the opportunity to be fully engaged with and supported through the research process, including being a named author for the published paper.

In a unique contribution to knowledge, our research revealed that students may perceive engaging with extracurricular activities to be harmful to them in various ways including, exclusion from peer groups, cultural pressure, and financial penalties. We also demonstrated that, related to the numerous responsibilities participants reported, poor experiences could result in a loss of confidence and increased stress, which runs counter to the narrative that extracurricular engagement can develop student confidence and enhance their coping skills (Thompson et al., 2013).

This paper was published in the *Journal of Further and Higher Education* (CiteScore: 3.6, SJR: 0.785) and it has been cited 37 times by authors similarly exploring how extracurricular engagement, or the pressure of engaging, can exclude diverse students and may have negative impact on belonging and wellbeing for some students. For example, Isopahkala-Bouret et al. (2022) emphasise how the purported benefits of ECA engagement for employability are dependent on the student's ability to operationalise their experiences in the employment market.

IV. R4

This was the second output from the study undertaken to investigate the impact of student engagement with extracurricular activities (ECAs) on studying practice. To facilitate an understanding of participants' socio-cognitive conceptualisation of university study, I led the creation of a self-efficacy at university scale, which was developed from Bandura's self-efficacy for school children scale (Bandura, 2006). This scale was included within a survey that also ascertained participant involvement in ECAs and collected simple demographic data. Our definition of ECAs was intentionally broad to include any non-timetabled activity regardless of the level of commitment required. The case study institution contains a high number of students from widening participation backgrounds, so it was important to include activity, such as caring and paid work, which are not typically included within the definition of culturally normative ECAs (Clegg et al., 2010).

This was the first study to explore the impact of ECAs on student self-efficacy. The findings demonstrated a positive association between higher levels of university self-efficacy and engagement with ECAs. The study also revealed that students involved with multiple ECAs had very high student self-efficacy, suggesting that there are several highly motivated students. However, the results reinforced the culturally normative view of ECAs, with those engaged with university-focussed activities (e.g., student representatives) reporting higher self-efficacy when compared with those engaged off-campus.

This paper was written collaboratively, with Day taking the lead on detailed quantitative analysis following my initial analysis. It was published in the *Journal of Further and Higher Education* (CiteScore: 3.6, SJR: 0.785) and it has been cited 30 times. It is mostly utilised by

other researchers to evidence the potential impact and benefits of engaging with extracurricular activities (Garcia, 2022; Priestley et al., 2022).

V. R5

This paper was the first output from a research project that investigated the experiences of university staff and student participants during the Covid-19 pandemic via a case study approach. Dickinson brought the team together, with Kellock and Fletcher taking part at various stages of the study. The data collection period took place over the course of one academic year and at two time points. This output reported the initial analysis of student participant data. As we were interested in how teaching and learning spaces had changed, and the impact of those changes, the methodological design utilised photovoice methodology to encourage participants to narrate their study spaces. The function of these participant-generated images was as tools of communication, as advocated by Rose (2014) in her exploration of the utility of images in research within the context of contemporary visual culture. Participant photographs were shared within a focus group setting as a focus for reflection on the impact of remote working on the student experience. Participants were invited to narrate their study space including, for example, the locale, objects, and equipment.

This output was an 'on the horizon' paper, which is a format for reporting initial findings, in a special issue entitled 'Transitions to Remote and Blended Learning'. This decision was informed by both the timely opportunity of inclusion within the special issue and to report some of the rich data gathered from the study, ahead of further analysis.

This paper established the intention to focus on a sociomaterial analysis of the research data. I proposed this approach to the research team who agreed that the focus on material concerns and their interplay with human action (Fenwick et al., 2011) provided an appropriate lens to analyse our data. Broadly, sociomaterial considerations of education are focussed on an analysis of practice, something that was of particular concern during the pandemic owing to the expeditious innovations required.

The Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice is a peer-reviewed journal. The paper has been cited 10 times. The findings have been employed for continuing to explore the implications for online learning following Covid restrictions (Thompson & Dale, 2022) and for supporting evidence for the University of Sussex active learning network to evidence the importance of engaging learners online (Dale et al., 2022).

VI. R6

This paper was conceived following what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) refer to as 'ethically important moments' (p. 262), an event during the process of undertaking research that

highlights ethical tensions and the limitation of procedural ethical approaches. During the data collection for the study outlined in R5, as I was about to use the screen sharing feature to show a participant's photograph for them to narrate their working space, I felt some trepidation about the extent to which participants understood how their photograph would be used by the research team. No participants raised concerns about how their images were used at any point during the study. However, I did reflect on the permanency of photographs as data. Qualitative data is usually filtered through the lens of the researcher, which is connected to Elliott's (2005) conceptualisation of researchers as narrators explored earlier. As such, the presentation of data can be managed to elevate risks such as, identifying individual participants or taking a participant's account out of context. Photographs taken by participants who may not comprehend the research context risk revealing more than they intended, either in the moment or reflecting later when their circumstances change.

Following this ethical 'moment', Dickinson suggested a concurrent project, with two researchers from the R5 project and a researcher independent from the project (Austin). We engaged with structured reflection, in an approach suggested by me and informed by Marshall et al.'s (2010) model for researcher reflection: identify focus, create immersion, reflexive analysis #1, experience of being researched, and reflexive analysis #2. Undertaking this project led to contemplation of the function of research ethics, beyond a procedural process that concludes with the ethics application so that the 'real' research can begin. Our assertion that research ethics should be an emergent process in line with relational ethical approaches was operationalised by the launch of a peer support scheme for research ethics within my institution, which I co-led with Austin.

This paper was collaboratively written via regular team discussion, and subsequent individual writing and editing. Social Research Practice is an open-access, online journal. The scope of the journal is to publish articles focussed on research practice. Submissions are peer-reviewed.

VII. R7

This was the second output from the pracademics project outlined in R2. This chapter, coordinated by me, focussed on investigating the use of artefacts as a methodological tool to encourage professional reflection. The decision to include artefacts was inspired by the work of Mark Doel (2019), who investigated how objects submitted by social work professionals could demonstrate the practice of social work. In this study, participants were asked to select an artefact that represented their transition from practice to academia. These were used to help focus group participants narrate their experiences and provide context to the semi-structured discussion that followed. As sociomateriality is concerned with the dynamic relationship between human and non-human actors (technology), objects can provide an illustration of a professional's relationship to their work life (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). The rich data collected

at this stage of the focus group led to me advocating for a dedicated output focussed on artefacts and I began by analysing the data and identifying the reported themes before discussing the progress and collaborating on the remaining writing with Dickinson.

In this chapter, two functions of professional objects are reported by the participants: tools, items that served a function; and totems, items that held symbolic or sentimental value. This reflected the existing literature on objects in the context of professional identity for a range of careers. The findings supported our earlier assertion of the pracademic as a distinct academic identity, multifaceted in accordance with the work they are carrying out, and iterative to support the transition from practice to academia (R2).

From a methodological perspective, the use of artefacts within a focus group design allowed access to participants who did not offer an artefact (as presenting an artefact was not a requirement for participation). This supported an understanding of the impact of employing a creative method. Barriers to engaging with creative methods may be the divergence of events away from expected research activities (Rainford, 2020). Out of the 42 participants in the pracademic study, 17 produced an artefact. Considering the barriers to engaging with creative methods, we considered this a success. Incidentally, Rainford's (2020) work also highlighted how methods that employ existing objects may be more successful than participant generated artefacts.

This chapter is included within a collection focussed on the topic of pracademics, which I co-edited for publication by Springer. The book proposal and each chapter within the collection were peer reviewed. This chapter was highlighted in a review of the collection as 'novel and thought-provoking' (Stone, 2024, p. 2). It has been cited by Moraga et al. (2024) to corroborate the incidence of participants using metaphor to conceptualise their professional identities. Following this work, I was invited to contribute to the academic development programme at Sheffield Hallam University to include a session specifically aimed at pracademic staff.

VIII. R8

This chapter was an output from the research project outlined in R5. Here, we focussed on the experience of academic staff participants who were forced to adapt their teaching approach during the Covid-19 pandemic. The chapter was included as part of an edited collection on teaching development during the Covid pandemic (Jamil and Morley, 2022). Due to the parameters of the call, this output focussed on three participants (out of a total of 26 participants), chosen due to their innovative approach to teaching practice. Kellock, Dickinson, and I selected these participants following the first round of data collection, and then interviewed one each for an in-depth investigation of their innovations. The first participant detailed how they delivered their practical, embodied teaching activity remotely. The second participant decided to generate original imagery to bring the external environment, relevant to

their discipline, into their teaching. The final participant, based in a health-related discipline, endeavoured to develop a student community remotely to enable shared practice and mutual support. Along with these innovations, the chapter notes some challenges faced by the participants including technological barriers and access to resources, time pressures, and loss of professional networks.

This was my first experience of conducting online interviews. On reflection, I did not appreciate the unique context of online research practice. This outlook was similarly reflected in the findings, with both student and staff participants reporting their expectation that in-person teaching and learning could be transposed online without the need for major adjustments. Although synchronous online interviews are viewed favourably by participants (Keemink et al., 2022), this fails to acknowledge those who may have been interested in taking part in the study but unable to overcome the specific barriers presented by engaging online (Curasi, 2001). Betts and Herb (2023) acknowledge the importance of fostering connections within online focus groups. This was a potential advantage of my insider status as participants were able to share their perspectives with someone who appreciated the context. More practically, maximising the utility of the technology was a consideration for online focus groups. Using the chat function and screensharing participant images helped to create narrative connections. This was another advantage of my insider status, as I knew participants were familiar with this technology from their own online practice. We also considered how we could include as many perspectives as possible by engaging with three methods of data collection: text from the 'chat', photographs taken by participants, and interview dialogue.

3. Synthesis of work as a coherent study and original contribution to knowledge

Following the analysis of the component publications, I explore the three major themes that elucidate the contribution to knowledge offered by this critical appraisal. References to the outputs are denoted by the number assigned to them above. In table 3 below, I have summarised each theme, the corresponding output, and the associated research question.

Theme	Output/s	Research question/s
Professional learning in liminal spaces	R1, R2, R3, R4, R7, R8	1
Education practice in atypical spaces	R5, R8	2
Creative methods and the material insider	R2, R5, R6, R7	3

Table 4: Each theme explored within the synthesis and its relationship to the corresponding output and research questions addressed by this appraisal (see Table 3).

I. Professional learning in liminal spaces

In relation to educators, Guskey (2000) defines professional development as 'processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students' (p. 16). Furthermore, Guskey (2000) emphasises that professional development is 'intentional… ongoing… systemic' (p. 16). However, it is important to acknowledge the 'messy' realities of working life for educators within higher education (R2, R7 and R8), where competing obligations and time pressures, can hinder efforts for systemic professional development activity. This highlights the importance of professional learning, which is characterised as informal and self-directed (Utami & Prestridge, 2018). Alongside the barriers to professional development, academic staff have diversified over the last twenty years. In response to increased student numbers and higher education policies progressively focussed on employability and graduate outcomes, those who have transitioned into academia as a 'second career' are more prevalent (LaRocco & Bruns, 2006).

Also referred to as 'pracademics', these colleagues have a web of connections to their previous practice that are both practical and literal, and philosophical or metaphysical (R2; R7). With regards to the former, in practice this can mean continuing to work within a practitioner setting part-time or drawing on professional networks to incorporate external contexts within teaching (Johnson and Ellis, 2023; Skea, 2023; R2; R7). However, a significant finding in R2 and R7 were the incidence of the latter. Pracademics may find the professional values developed during their practitioner experience influencing their teaching and research practice. Rather than discarding their previous practice, pracademics are often driven by how they might continue to influence professional practice in their role as academics (R2).

However, despite well-considered and deliberate transitions into higher education, pracademics often report that this change can be full of complexities. New pracademics may be surprised by the range of roles required of the contemporary academic, who must navigate myriad policy considerations including, for example, employability, internationalisation, and technological developments (Barry, 2023). Taking up the importance of professional values during this transition, Wood et al. (2014) suggest that value conflict may result in pracademics

feeling that they are contributing little to their new working environment. This is reflected in R2, where participants describe the importance of maintaining some relevance to practice for providing 'authority' in their teaching role (R2, p. 297). This practice/academic conflict can be so acute that pracademics leave academia (Gourlay, 2011). Bamber et al. (2017) emphasise the distinction between liminality and limbo, with liminality conceptualised as temporary or permanent professional fluidity, without the wholly negative connotations of limbo. Both R2 and R7 report on findings from a multi-disciplinary participant pool, as such I would determine that, dependent on factors such as personal career goals and values, disciplinary traditions, and the relevance of practitioner perspectives, pracademics can embody each of Bamber et al.'s four definitions of liminality (Bamber et al., 2017 cited in Izak et al., 2023). Such as: transitional, for those new to academia; permanent and perpetual, for those who work in a dual role as academic and practitioner; limbo, for those struggling to adjust to academia (and who may eventually leave); and liquid, for those comfortable moving in and out of practitioner/academic identities (referred to as 'chameleons' in R2).

The recommendations in R2 are for universities to support transitions through advancing professional development programmes tailored to assist pracademics with recognising the benefits of their practitioner experiences, but with the goal of constructing their professional identity within academia. Pracademics can also advance professional learning opportunities through mentorship and communities of practice, and not just within academia.

More broadly, the presence of pracademics within university spaces can be attributed to the influence of capitalism (Lefebvre, 1901/1991), where university education is commodified as capital for operation in the employment market. Arguably, pracademics, with their connections to industry and learning for employment, reinforce this message. As Government policy continues to drift towards graduate outcomes (Fryer, 2022a), the independence of academia from the influence of industry becomes more challenging. However, as noted earlier, the findings from R2 and R7 demonstrated that pracademics were also seeking to influence change through their role in academia through supporting students to critically assess industry practices.

In symbiosis with pracademics, university student numbers have increased and diversified (Office for National Statistics, 2016). As demonstrated in R3 and R4, students today are familiar with employability policy, whether overtly or intuitively, through consistent messaging about skill development, work experience, and graduate employment. Furthermore, due to their financial dependence on student fees, universities have a vested interest in positioning themselves as sagacious spaces for learning and professional development, a reflection of their hegemonic interpretation of knowledge (Lefebvre, 1901/1991). Students absorb this message culturally and through the socialised practices of their higher education experience, which highlight individualistic achievement and graduate outcomes (R3). One example of this practice, explored in R1, R3 and R4, is the myriad opportunities for engagement with extra-curricular

activities (ECAs) through, for instance, clubs and societies, development events, volunteering, and student representation.

The development of the self-efficacy at university scale was designed to investigate the potential impact of engagement with ECAs on students' belief in their ability to manage their studies. The research proposed to discover if, and to what extent, there were connections between these two domains. By collecting data on ECA engagement alongside the university self-efficacy scores, the impact of engagement could be evaluated. Although self-efficacy is a domain-specific measure, Bandura (2006) acknowledges that when an individual perceives similarities between skills in multiple domains, self-efficacy can permeate across domains. The findings demonstrated a positive relationship between engagement with ECAs and higher levels of university self-efficacy, but it was activities closely associated with the university domain with the greatest impact. Consequently, students may need support to be able to identify similarities between their domains of activity. Furthermore, the findings from R3 demonstrate that students may view ECAs as occupying a liminal space. Participants recognised the potential benefits of engagement for their professional development, with the ECAs that have favourable outcomes for graduate careers and employment more highly valued. However, pressure from personal and studying spheres (including roles and activities, such as student, worker, carer, and commuter) can create anxiety around, and ultimately rejection of, ECAs as 'just another thing to think about' (R3, p. 750). Lueg et al. (2023) suggests that universities may be sustaining this anxiety. They examined how pre-enrolment narratives of university as a structured path to a successful 'dream' career shifted post-enrolment to focus on individual student self-optimisation. These narratives may produce a 'disjunction' (Savin-Baden, 2008, p. 105), or a moment of recognition, in this case that engagement with ECAs may smooth the path to a future career. Disjunctions foster liminality where a range of responses can occur, including avoidance and postponement, or making the choice to engage (Savin-Baden, 2008). These are all responses evidenced in R1 and R3, where avoidance and postponement were displayed by participants choosing to focus on their studies. Conversely, some engaged participants perceived that their ECAs could benefit their studies through, for example, making friends and developing a support network. Overall, the focus on graduate careers often obscured these benefits, making them easier to dismiss within the wider student population. Furthermore, an important finding from R4 was a small number of participants who reported engagement with several ECAs and simultaneously recorded high levels of university self-efficacy. Although causation cannot be determined, considering the anxieties about focussing on studies reported in the qualitative data, engagement with ECAs may be dependent on student confidence within the academic sphere to enable them to manage multiple foci.

This section has established how each of the relevant outputs explore the significance of space to professional learning and career development, furthering existing debate on the impact of liminal spaces and suggesting how this state can be operationalised for personal and professional change. The next phase of my research considered to what extent altered teaching

and learning spaces could expose educational practice, particularly in the context of innovations. This is explored in the next section.

II. Educational practice in atypical spaces

Critical realist perspectives consider how the separate entities of structure and agency mediate and interrelate with one another to influence emergent practice (Leonardi, 2013). For outputs R5 and R8, the pandemic provided a unique context for examining the significance of campus spaces to teaching and learning practice through an appreciation of the structural and agentic changes that emerged during the period of working from home and how they might illuminate future educational practice. Spatial theory is applied across a range of contexts within higher education including, student belonging (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2022; Trawalter et al., 2021), the development of learning spaces (Beckers et al., 2015; Ellis and Goodyear, 2016), and for examining inequalities (Metcalfe, 2009; Manderscheid, 2009). The spatial contexts relevant to R5 and R8 are the increase in commuting students (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022) and the rise of digital learning within traditional campus-based courses (Munro, 2018), both of which continue to influence the de-centralisation of campus spaces pre- and post-pandemic. However, rather than representing a novel or 'pure' space, online spatial practice is bound by historical cultural influences. Massey (1994) highlights that both space and time should be conceptualised simultaneously (as space-time) because space/s encompass historical contexts as well as being continuously, and dynamically, produced. Despite some claims that digitalisation is a democratising force for education, others note that online practice is still embodied practice, enacted in tandem with technologies and in the context of existing cultural frameworks (Gourlay, 2022a). This argument is supported by research that demonstrates how, rather than fostering availability, digitalisation policy and practice can reinforce the structural marketisation of higher education (Munro, 2018; Perrotta, 2018).

The outcomes of R5 and R8 further existing debates of spaces as a central, mutable facet of practice. The findings of R5 and R8 support Trowler and Knights' (2000) supposition that universities contain numerous distinct, dynamic cultural structures influencing practice, through evidencing the differential disciplinary approaches to remote teaching and the increased existential distance between organisational actors and management. If practice is ontologically entwined with learning, a key tenet of Vygotsky (Daniels, 2017) it is imperative for research to illuminate the impact of culture changes in atypical spaces so that practice can be foregrounded and critically examined. The context of the pandemic, and the shift to online teaching and learning, presented a unique opportunity to explore the significance of campus spaces to the cultural milieu of the university.

The findings in R5 highlight the loss of community as a major impact for students who studied remotely, as peer support, and contextual and social cognitive learning approaches were all very challenging to practice, throwing their importance into sharp relief. This loss was articulated in concert with physical and material factors, including interaction within informal spaces and spatial influences on learner identities ("[I'm] gonna be in these grand buildings and

lecture halls and [I'm] going to feel like a student"). This conclusion was reiterated in R8, which focussed on the teaching practice of academics during the pandemic, and demonstrated how lecturers recognised, and sought to mediate, the loss of communities. The participants reported on subsequent innovations to their practice, all of which involved experimenting with new tools. Examples included one participant who facilitated student peer engagement via a co-constructed course newsletter and initiating a WhatsApp group. Another, who wished to foreground the wider context of their teaching materials, developed an image library of the built environment created on walks during lockdown. Through innovating in this way, these participants are acknowledging the importance of tools (the sociomaterial) to students' sociocognitive learning processes (Han and Ellis (2017). Massey's (1994) concept of space-time is particularly pertinent here as the findings from R8 demonstrate how academic participants considered what was important for them to conserve from the past (student community) in relation to their chosen innovation, as they sought to stabilise the fluctuating space-time of the pandemic teaching environment.

Lecturers similarly expressed the loss of their professional community as one of the major challenges of the pandemic restrictions on practice. This included peer support for teaching, problem-solving, and making quick queries by 'knock[ing] on somebody's door' and chatting 'in corridors and next to coffee machines' (R8, p.87). These accounts support ideas around the importance of liminal 'in-between' spaces at work for inspiring practice (Shortt, 2015, p. 654). Although some participants supported colleagues by team teaching online, others highlighted how the social distance had obscured the challenges of remote delivery by preventing collegiate discussion. The isolation experienced during this period, both in terms of the physical distance and the 'ad-hoc provision' offered by institutional and Government policy makers (Tilak & Kumar, 2022, p. 621), provided little opportunity for lecturers to engage with any structured professional development or informal collaborative learning, so critical to developing new ways of working (Daniels, 2004). Participants from R8 were also acutely aware of their distance from students, creating a challenging environment for professional learning, which 'is crucially dependent on the contribution of the clients or users' (Daniels, 2004, p. 194), and in developing practice for an emergent remote curriculum (Cliff et al., 2022).

This section has explored how practice within atypical learning spaces has informed the relevance of spatial theory in education and professional learning, by demonstrating how staff and students within university spaces draw from their engagement with the community to inform their practice. Next, the final section of this synthesis is an exploration of the methods employed within the submitted works and how they may facilitate a deeper understanding of material concerns.

III. Creative methods and the material insider

Although traditionally used in arts-based research, Kara (2015) notes how creative methods can support social scientists with uncovering the complexity of 'truth' (p. 6). This is important in the context of my positionality as all the outputs report findings from insider research, which can

carry the risk of bias and subjectivity (Greene, 2014). Mannay (2016) advocates that creative methodological approaches can help to regulate these limitations by suspending 'preconceptions of familiar territory, and facilitate an understanding of the unique viewpoints of [the] participants' (p. 42). Creative methods were used across a range of the submitted outputs (these are summarised in table 4 below, alongside the studies that influenced them).

Output ref. no	**Method/s**
R2 and R7	Participant-selected artefacts (Scholar, 2017; Doel, 2019)
R3	Activity-orientated questions (Colucci, 2007)
R5 and R6	Participant-generated images (Warne et al., 2013)

Table 4: Information about the outputs that utilise a creative method, the method that was used, and the studies that influenced these approaches.

These methods were operationalised within a container of more traditional qualitative approaches with the aim of supporting participants to engage with material concerns and facilitate their narratives, for uncovering 'something about the cultural framework within which individuals make sense of their lives' (Elliott, 2005, p. 28). Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) considers how material contexts mediate action, with the specific view that mediation is historically situated. As Fenwick et al. (2015) explain, 'all artefacts come from somewhere, were made under certain conditions, and emerged from specific sets of goals and purposes' (p. 62).

As previously acknowledged, universities are increasingly diverse institutions, so creative methods may help participants make sense of their experience within complex organisations (Broussine, 2008). However, this diverse environment could also create limitations for researchers employing creative methods due to varied cultural understandings of what constitutes 'creativity' (Kara, 2015). This was acknowledged in R6, where the ethical implications of utilising participant-generated images were explored. It was noted in R6 that image-making may facilitate a Euro-American focus on 'seeing' for meaning making (Banks, 2014) and the intercultural misunderstandings that may arise as a result (R6). The dialogic approach to data analysis was selected to focus on the discursive meaning of the participants' artefact or photograph rather than the image itself (Shortt & Warren, 2019). With regards to the reproduction of participant photographs in R8 (and in another recent output, Griffiths and Dickinson, 2024), we made the decision to omit photographs in line with our axiological conclusions in R6.

Broussine (2008) articulates four assumptions regarding the use of creative methods, and I utilise two of these assumptions, selected for their relevance, to explore the ontological underpinning of this body of work below, these are: '3. The data that are generated by creative methods often take on metaphorical forms, and metaphor offers insights into organizational experience. 4. Collaborative approaches to inquiry are appropriate for the exploration of human experience.' (p. 20)

i. Metaphor

Colucci (2007) suggests that metaphorical discussions can support participants to address difficult topics in an indirect, non-threatening way. For example, a participant in R5 used imagery of 'grand buildings and lecture halls' in relation to their conceptualisation of what it meant to 'feel like a student', to describe their reaction to the loss of their student experience during remote learning. Their use of metaphor enabled them to illustrate the distance between their current experience and their expectations. In the pracademic context, the participant in Gourlay's case study (2011) referred to above, conceptualises their discomfort through metaphors of materiality, stating how they felt out of place ('I felt I'd landed on the moon') and inferior within the academic hierarchy ('I was kind of right at the bottom of the tree') (p. 595). This is echoed in R2 when a pracademic participant reflects that their transition to academia was 'like falling off a cliff' (R2, p. 298). These reflections provide a graphic representation of the discomfort of occupying a liminal professional space.

In his work exploring the objects submitted by social workers to represent their practice, Doel (2019) suggests that metaphorical objects are particularly helpful for students who may not yet have accumulated more utilitarian objects owning to the early stage of their professional practice. Similarly, pracademics, when reflecting on the early stages of their academic career, used metaphorical objects to encapsulate their professional values. It was with participant selected artefacts in R7 that we were able to explain how pracademics' professional values influenced their academic practice, for example, 'The artefact that I've brought is my ears [. . .] I mean because obviously as a journalist for many years, it's about listening to people [. . .] and following things up all the time […] I would like to think that I use that here as well, because part of my role as the joint course leader is pastoral […] and devoting time to actually listen to [students]' (R7, p 123). Encouraging participants to use metaphor, through the employment of objects and photographs, was also a mitigation for the researchers' insider status. Through providing participants control over selecting their artefact or taking their photograph and encouraging them to narrate their experience using these elements as a prompt, researcher and participant share responsibility for the direction of the research (Mannay, 2016; Shortt & Warren, 2019). However, Scholar (2017) notes that reducing objects to their semiotic importance could be a limitation of research that utilises artefacts due to the risk of ignoring the other aspects of the social life of the object.

ii. Collaboration

The employment of photo-elicitation methods in R5 and R8 and the use of participant-selected artefacts in R2 and R7 enabled a metacognitive approach to data collection. Participants were participatory, collaborative partners in the research (Mannay, 2016) and our aim was to understand how participants interacted with the materiality of their working and studying surrounds, which is itself a form of collaboration, accordant with sociomaterial approaches (Acton, 2017). Similarly, Rowsell (2011) describes the use of artefacts within an interview

setting as providing a 'broader aperture' (p. 334) for understanding how the interaction of various components influence participants' experiences (and in the context of my research, their practice).

Creative methods also supported collaboration more practically. The use of activity-orientated questions in R3 enabled participants to engage with others in the focus group, to compare their ideas, and encourage participation by de-centring personal experiences, which some may be reluctant to share. Colucci (2007) suggests that activities can enable reflexivity and support those who need extra time to think about their responses, creating a more inclusive atmosphere. Kara (2015) reports that reviews of research involving focus groups reveal that researchers rarely focus on interaction between participants when writing up their data. In R2, interaction is reported to demonstrate the cohesive experiences of pracademics newly entering higher education, this included a reference to laughter shared by participants and in R3 gestures supplementing student accounts are included in the research findings.

However, researchers need to be mindful that creativity is not the architect of collaboration. Using the example of his study, which invited people who were homeless to share their experiences through taking autobiographical photographs, Packard (2008) challenges the 'implicit assumption' that photo-elicitation addresses some of the power imbalance between researcher and participant (p. 75). Packard's (2008) conclusions, that participant knowledge and power should be assessed to maximise their chances of influencing the research, was explored in R6. Comparing my participant pool with Packard's reveals their relative privilege in their ability to narrate their photographs and understand how to use photography to capture what they wish to communicate. This corresponds with Rainford's (2020) assertion that creative activities should be selected in a way that is commensurate with participants' abilities. Conversely, it was my participants' comfort with taking photographs that was the focus of my anxiety about the ethical implications of the research. Participants were able to easily engage with their photograph, but they may not have understood the implications of where their image might be displayed in the research context.

This section has addressed how creative methods support researchers to understand the significance of space and materiality to learning. Using participant-driven photographs and artefacts, and activity-based questions, a deeper understanding of the cultural context of learning and professional development can be generated. Furthermore, space, materiality, and their regulating influence on practice, are foregrounded.

4. Conclusion

The impetus for critical spatial focussed research is to engage with debates about the manifestation of power. In this work, I have explained how space/s contribute to learning practice in the context of professional and student learning activity. Engaging with a set of related empirical studies over time has enabled a range of contributions to my personal journey

as a researcher, for the development of theory, and to posit explanatory conclusions. As a researcher I have been able to develop an emergent research practice, whilst engaging in and collaborating with the wider research community. This has supported a reflexive approach to research practice, demonstrated by R6 and the development of a further contribution to ethics in practice research in an upcoming edited collection, which reports on the implementation of a project enacted from the recommendations in R6. Furthermore, I have contributed to the consideration of the sociomaterial within university practices and through a methodological contribution. These conclusions can support the development of practice as universities increasingly shift part of their teaching online and consider how they use campus spaces in a post-Covid era (Times Higher Education, 2024). Consequently, I am currently engaged with a project that explores the context of working spaces to explain the levels of belongingness amongst academic staff, which also uses participant-generated photographs. Finally, following a tenet of critical realist research practice, I have developed explanatory studies that seek to understand the causal mechanisms that shape practice. This cuts to the heart of what universities are for. The political and managerial focus on outcomes reinforces constructs of learning commodification. The empirical evidence presented in this programme of studies demonstrate how these constructs influence practice through the recruitment and professional development of pracademics, student concepts of the value of extracurricular activity (ECAs), and impact of remote teaching and learning. However, I have also presented evidence of emancipatory practices away from these limiting constructs. First, how pracademics seek to critically engage with change in the professions. Second, how a compassionate and person-centred approach to promoting ECA engagement may support diverse students. Third, how academics and their students acutely felt the loss of their communities during Covid.

Subsequently, this work simultaneously reaffirms the importance of university spaces for facilitating learning communities and engaging with critical narratives about the world, and highlights the need for external and inclusive engagement beyond the formal containers of campus. As universities approach critical junctures, where both their purpose and approaches are examined in the context of a rapidly changing world, I anticipate that the work presented in the papers here will contribute to the essential activity of continually examining power structures and their impact on staff, students, and the cultural learning environment.

Word count: 9,944

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