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Stuck in the middle with you: the role of senior leaders as third space professionals

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Abstract

This collaborative opinion piece offers the perspective that senior leaders must move beyond their traditional places within the academic or professional services spaces to act as hybrid professionals or translators. We take five perspectives as senior leaders and build a collective opinion of our view of the role of senior leaders as third space professionals. Senior leaders must move across boundaries, becoming third space professionals and by actively taking a liminal or neutral position between defined spaces, they share and communicate their expertise or service in a way that encourages collaboration and improved communication between groups. This conceptualisation of role and approach reinforces the notion of a single university community which supports individual, team, and organisational goals for the primary benefit of the student members of the community. Our collective opinion is that effective senior leaders in higher education will: actively occupy the third space; understand different needs to reach common goals; value all types of expertise; and communicate, communicate, communicate.

Keywords: community; third space professional; leadership.

Introduction

The premise of this special issue of the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE) is that third space professionals are necessary to ‘occupy the liminal space between academic and professional services in higher education’ (ALDinHE, 2024, n.p.). If a liminal or transitional space exists between the defined spaces of academic and professional services, and if there are roles which have a clear purpose of existing within this space, there must be a separation between those identities. However, a third space professional must also belong to one of those binary groupings, at least in the practical sense of their employment being contracted into one of those groups. Therefore, third space professionals must either elect to identify themselves as such, or they come to realise that they provide the fluidity of function or identification where they belong to both groups or neither. Similarly, the colleagues who identify themselves as more solidly academic or professional services, may not recognise or potentially value the role of their third space and hybrid colleagues.

In this opinion piece we share our view of the academic and professional services divide. The lead author initially reflected upon her own role as a senior leader within the liminal spaces between academic and professional services and her perception of being a translator and facilitator to bridge a communication divide (Purvis et al., 2022). Using this viewpoint as the initiating opinion, we took the following approach to forming our collective opinion piece.

Method

The lead author asked four colleagues in senior leadership roles, two academics and two professional services, to write ~300 words in response to three questions:

1. What are your reflections on any divide between academics and professional services?
2. Do you have any role in bridging that divide?
3. Do you see yourself as a third space professional?

The details of the JLDHE call for special issue papers and the definition of third space professionals as those who ‘transcend traditional academic and administrative roles and are characterised by a hybrid and often fluid function that includes elements of academic expertise and professional service’ (ALDiHE, 2024, n.p.) was also supplied.

The colleagues were approached because each person occupied a different type of senior leadership role in different teams and university functions (Table 1). All individuals agreed to be involved in writing the article. The responses were analysed using content analysis for common themes (Bengtsson, 2016).

Table 1. Role characteristics.

Role Title	Description of Role	Type of Contract	Years in Role/ Institution	Code
Head of Teaching and Learning Enhancement	College (faculty) leadership role working across departments and intro central university	Academic, Senior Staff Grade	1 / 18	A1
Head of Academic Advising	A central teaching and learning directorate role working across the university on a specific theme.	Academic, Senior Staff Grade	6 / 26	A2
Head of Digital Architecture	A central digital and technology services role working across the university and key group connecting into teaching and learning delivery	Professional Services, Senior Staff Grade	5 / 25	P1
Director of Library and Campus Services	A central directorate role working across the university and managing a range of student facing services.	Professional Services, Senior Staff Grade	5 / 5	P2
Associate Dean Teaching and Learning	A college (faculty) leadership role working at cross-department and institutional strategic levels.	Academic, Senior Staff Grade	3 / 24	Convening author

Findings

Our opinion, based on our shared contributions, is that effective senior leaders in higher education:

1. Actively occupy the third space.
2. Understand different needs to reach common goals.
3. Value all types of expertise.
4. Communicate, communicate, communicate.

We explore these four themes in turn.

Actively occupy the third space

All co-authors reflected that they had some aspect of a liminal or third space professional identity or purpose. Their perceptions ranged from hybridity being a core aspect of their identity to the recognition that while they would not describe themselves as a third space professional, their role of being a translator or bridging a gap was an important part of how they approached their work.

I feel like I'm in a hybrid role, helping facilitate positive working relationships between professional services and academic staff. (A2)

I don't claim academic expertise but focus very much on applying the expertise I do have on supporting academic activity and development. (P1)

While there were clear differences in how the identity of a third space professional were felt by co-authors, each appreciated the value of making connections and collaborations that bridge the liminal space:

...successful academic leadership is not necessarily about having all of the relevant expertise. It is about recognising talent and expertise in others, trusting that talent and expertise, and then making connections between those who have it and those who need it. (A1)

...when academic and professional work together collegiately in partnership and through collaboration good things happen for students, staff, and the organisation. (P2)

The place of a third space professional may be challenging to occupy, perhaps due to the lack of understanding, limited value by others, or tensions between those who bridge the space and the traditional groups of academics and professional services (Whitchurch, 2018).

...through my roles and the way I work I am probably a classic third space professional, but I tend not to think about myself that way. (P2)

Understand different needs to reach common goals

Despite having common goals, the co-authors all recognised that there were often misunderstandings and assumptions that impacted negatively on achieving those shared goals.

...both 'sides' of the divide have the same overarching goals and purpose. (A1)

Solutions to misunderstandings and assumptions included advocating for each other, being appreciative for our roles and how we work together for those shared outcomes. Taking a flexible and empathetic approach is necessary to encourage and empower colleagues across boundaries (Heard-Lauréote and Buckley, 2021).

...looking to understand and promote the needs of academics in central IT and be an advocate for greater emphasis on their needs. (P1)

I think institutions can do more to facilitate positive ways of working together, for example through appreciate inquiry rather than deficit-based approaches. (P2)

Value and appreciate all types of expertise

Colleagues who have a strong identity as a third space professional may feel isolated and misunderstood through this liminal identity and therefore will need the support of strong leaders (Kukhareva and Buckley, 2023). Leaders who actively advocate for and push themselves into the third space, visibly demonstrate value and appreciation of all types of expertise, particularly where there is a lack of recognition of that expertise:

[There is] a lack of awareness of the expertise that third space professionals offer. (A1)

I have observed ... [the] lack of recognition that professional staff are experts, despite much of that expertise deriving from higher degrees alongside practice... (P2)

[There are] assumptions over the relationship of different roles to the student experience and high-quality teaching and learning (A1)

The use of terms such as 'non-academic' suggests a deficit and can have a divisive and negative impact (Caldwell, 2024). The professional value of all in the university community will be an underpinning factor for any distance between identities.

...the identification and othering of professional staff as 'non-academic'... (P2)

Whitchurch (2018) has suggested 'academic' and 'professional services' are converging to become less distinct. This is not typical of our experience and the two communities maintain strong identities, with specific expectations, and therefore remain largely separate. Indeed, Whitchurch (2023) also proposes recommendations to support development and valuing of third space careers and professions in the future. Critical and specific action will be needed to meaningfully converge these spaces.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

The theme of communication was strongly woven through all responses. Missing or ineffective communication between colleagues resulted in a variety of negative consequences including feeling excluded, losing autonomy, losing agency, creating or widening a divide, or generating misunderstandings.

Academics can feel they are 'out of the loop' ... which can place them in a difficult position... (A2)

A centralised service deprives academics of autonomy and reduces their opportunities to experiment and develop in return for easier scaling and management. (P1)

...there is certainly a difference in the ease of communication between academics and professional services staff in this space in recent years that likely impacts academic staff more acutely than professional services staff and could be considered a 'divide'. (A2)

The cultural differences were also described as a key factor influencing communication and understanding:

Cultural differences often make it hard for each side to communicate in ways that promote engagement and understanding of the other. (P1)

...professional services staff not always grasping the connection academic staff can have with their students. It can feel there is sometimes a lack of understanding... (A2)

Therefore, active listening, taking time to communicate, ensuring two-way dialogue (Whitchurch, 2023), and having advocates who enter the third space to stand alongside colleagues will be critical to eliminating the gap between the sub-communities within higher education (Pretero et al., 2023). We must also consider the specialists who are typically excluded from the classic academic and professional services groups (i.e. learning technologists) and view how these colleagues occupy often unseen liminal spaces (Stoten, 2023). The skills that these hybrid professionals have in communicating within and between spaces will be of high value, skills that we all need to develop. Our role as senior leaders is to actively remove barriers and boundaries within and beyond our university community, standing alongside others in the third space. Senior leaders must also actively bridge and show value for colleagues in all groups and communities. It is the purposeful activation and facilitation in the third space, actions that hybrid professionals naturally undertake, which senior leaders must also actively adopt and communicate.

Conclusion

It is our opinion that senior leaders have a responsibility for bridging the divide between academic and professional service spaces. As leaders we should all take on the role of a third space professional and bring colleagues closer together for more collaboration and better communication, which then results in more impactful change to ultimately benefit our students and their outcomes.

Future research may explore which academic and professional services roles are entrenched in their spaces and which transcend the traditional binary. Perhaps a successful university is characterised a higher proportion of staff working in the third space, and therefore evaluation can establish the impact of third space activity on institutional performance indicators including student outcomes. There may also be an opportunity for a third and hybrid type of employment contract which reflects and values the hybrid professional.

As the lyrics of the 1973 Stealers Wheel song state: 'Clowns to the left of me. Jokers to the right. Here I am stuck in the middle with you' (Rafferty and Egan, 1973). It is the role of senior leaders to be in the middle, in the third space, to actively support third space

professionals and colleagues from all groupings to move across boundaries and overcome barriers to achieve our shared goals together. As to who are the clowns and who are the jokers? Only third space professionals could possibly say...

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