



Why can't higher education agree on terminology for third-space professionals?

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Abstract

Poorly defined roles and inconsistently used titles present a significant barrier to understanding and valuing the work of third-space professionals (Bird, 2004; Caldwell, 2022; Veles et al., 2023). People in these roles make a significant contribution to learning and teaching in higher education, bringing pedagogical and technological expertise to an increasingly complex domain. A lack of understanding of these roles makes it hard to build trust and foster effective collaboration. This brief communication considers factors in higher education, from the cultural to the pragmatic, which contribute to this confusion.

Keywords: third space professional; learning designer; educational technologist; academic developer.

The problem

For a sector that loves understanding and naming things, higher education can be rather terrible at it when it comes to its own staff. This presents several significant problems when it comes to the third-space professionals who support educators in their learning and teaching practice. Poorly defined roles and inconsistently used titles make it harder for academics to know where to seek assistance and how well they can trust the advice provided. If they have previously been advised well by a learning designer, would a digital education officer be as helpful? Recruiting the best new staff for these roles might also be stymied if prospective employees fail to include an unusual role title in their search terms.

I have worked in the tertiary education third space for more than twenty years, in roles focused on educational technology, learning design and academic development. I am a leader in the ASCILITE TEledvisors Network, a community of practitioners in this space,

and my doctoral research centres around the inhibitors and enablers of practitioner efficacy in the higher education third space. One of the biggest barriers to efficacy that I have found in my research is role clarity.

In one study that I collaborated on, we analysed job advertisements for third-space professionals in teaching-support-focused roles and found 26 distinct titles in 37 advertisements (Mitchell et al., 2017). In these kinds of third-space roles, somebody tasked with providing training to enhance the pedagogical practice of academics and engaging with the scholarship of teaching and learning might be called an academic/education developer, a lecturer (digital futures) or a curriculum advisor. Someone else who assists educators with designing and building learning activities and resources for online environments might be a learning/education/instructional designer or an educational/learning technologist. Other educational technologists will evaluate, implement, manage and support core institutional learning technologies, in collaboration with university IT teams. The lack of consistency in the purpose and language around learning designer/educational technologist roles is perhaps the most notable and has been for many decades. Geis and Klaassen (1972) wrote about the confusion resulting from inconsistent use of these terms across roles more than fifty years ago.

So why is there such variation in terminology or definitions for third-space roles?

Context and seniority

Third-space professionals in a role such as learning designer often work in different areas of a university, such as a central unit or based in a faculty/college, which shapes the purpose of their work. While they may do similar things, a centrally located learning designer might be assigned to an institution-wide project to transition online courses to a single template, while a faculty-based learning designer might work hand-in-hand with a small group of academics to introduce them to the idea of hybrid teaching. The titles are the same, but the work differs greatly. Titles may also indicate seniority based on what seem to be random schema – I have seen some institutions where an education designer was senior to a learning designer and others where the opposite was true.

Human and strategic factors

More pragmatically, I suspect one of the main reasons that terminology is so variable boils down to individual preferences. A new leader may take over a division and want to make their mark by renaming everything and everyone to align with their new philosophy. A manager may surmise that institutional bean counters looking at raw lists of employees might be less likely to cut people with certain titles when there are only three of them and not 35. A team lead may simply feel that 'developer' has more gravitas than 'designer' and that academics will feel more comfortable working with them.

Is there a solution?

While solving issues of local needs, individual linguistic taste, and pragmatic strategising seems insurmountable, it may just be a question of will. Similar issues arose around the language used to describe professional staff in the 1990s and 2000s in Australian higher education, where 'general staff' and the deficit-focused 'non-academic' were commonplace (Szekeres, 2004; Graham, 2012). In 2011, the Association of Tertiary Education Managers (in Australia) decided that 'professional staff' would be used, and this has become the norm. So, a way to enact change is conceivable – if we can agree on what the terminology should be. I would suggest that whatever process that involves, the voices of the practitioners it will most directly affect need to be the loudest in the conversation.

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