



Harnessing the power of professional associations to unite the third space community

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Abstract

In this opinion piece, we discuss career pathways and trajectories for third space professionals. We explore the unique difficulties of career progression for those in the third space compared to the more recognised and established routes for academic colleagues, or those who work in professional services who are employed on 'academic' contracts. We argue that, in order to overcome these difficulties and make potential career pathways and trajectories more visible, we should conceptualise the third space itself as a collective unity. In creating an interconnected third space community, individuals could be supported to move between and across territories and boundaries which encompass different professional identities within the wider third space itself as a professional sphere. In support of this, we issue a 'Call for Collaboration' to our respective third space professional associations. We argue, that by enhancing and increasing interaction between fields within the third space, opportunities can be cross-promoted more effectively, resulting in greater career development opportunities and increased support for respective members.

Keywords: third space; career; career progression; professional identity; professional associations.

Introduction: the challenge of career progression for third space professionals

Career trajectories or progression routes for third space professionals (see Whitchurch, 2018) are not as obviously apparent or linear as they may seem for academic colleagues, or those on academic contracts, who have a progression trajectory that is well-recognised and accepted across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Lawrence, 2022; Shotts and Shaw, 2022). The disparate nature of the arrival routes, or 'origins' of staff who hold third space positions in HEIs, such as Learning Developers, Technicians, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) tutors or Academic Developers, makes for an eclectic mix of people and skills, but the roles and professions across the third space are united by the same challenges in respect to career progression. Although we arrive from various routes with varied origins and heritage, we are all ultimately faced with the same challenging question: *where do we go from here?* The authors draw upon their lived experience moving from Learning Development to Academic Development, so this features heavily in our narrative, however, the challenges of progression within the third space are not limited to this specific trajectory.

Although recognition and progression from within the third space *is* increasingly possible (see McIntosh and Nutt, 2022 on the concept of 'integrated professionals' and their emergent value), lack of a career progression pathway means it can be difficult for individuals to plan their career trajectory. As a result, third space professionals face career insecurity and potential stagnation coupled with the challenges of navigating a relatively new professional sphere within higher education (HE). Lack of clarity around potential next steps means we have nowhere to turn for advice as management and senior leaders cannot currently offer any alternative to the aforementioned 'traditional academic' career pathways.

Rather than seeking to avoid the problem (one option), or try to 'shoe-horn' third space professionals onto an academic career path (a slightly better option that suits some more than others, but is still not without its challenges), senior leaders might consider updating the progression structure of our HEIs. There is a growing need to accommodate the rise in 'integrated' or 'blended' professionals to harness the value of our integrated experiences and retain our extensive spheres of research, influence, enterprise and expertise. At present, HEI structures hang behind the emergent professionalisation of these roles.

Advance HE's recent amendments to the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) 2023 gives renewed primacy to 'professional values' in line with the practices inherent across a number of third space roles (Advance HE, 2023). The revised PSF also includes reference to 'student support, guidance and wellbeing' across the core knowledge and activities which clearly evidences the need for more inclusive professional recognition of third space professionals and their contribution across the sector. In addition, a renewed championing of collaboration (which is common practice in the third space – almost out of necessity) and the embedding of inclusive practice throughout, all point to greater recognition of the contribution and practice of third space and related roles to HE, moving *beyond* the concept of the HE educator as a 'subject specific academic' on that clear career trajectory referenced earlier.

How have third space professionals responded to the challenge of limited career progression opportunities so far?

Learning Developers, Technicians, support staff, Educational Developers, amongst other third space and related professionals, have taken steps to clearly define their fields with the establishment of respective professional bodies. We have made ourselves adaptable to different roles and perspectives by flexing as integrated, blended or even 'hybrid practitioners' (see Grayson and Syska, 2024); holding one foot in the third space and one in the academic sphere, to try and give ourselves multiple options for career progression. However, there is a growing sense of frustration and anger with waiting for our clearly valued and valuable work to transpire into structural change which could enhance our opportunities for progression. Although there is scope to move within the third space (and this is a tricky subject to navigate, see Grayson, 2024 on the difficulties of presenting options for movement to different third space roles when staff are integrally wedded to defining and championing their present third space identity) even progressive movements within the third space mean staff can be left confronting the same problem of where to go next from a different third space perspective. Therefore, in this opinion piece we argue that a potential model for progression might emerge from conceptualising the third space itself as a collective unity.

Collective unity within the third space: professional associations and identities

The associations for various professional bodies in the third space, such as the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE), BALEAP, the Association for Learning Technology (ALT), the United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring Association (UKAT), Society of Quality Assurance (SQA), Association of Higher Education Professionals (AHEP) and Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) amongst others, have been integral in providing a space for members to gain the type of professional recognition that could contribute to career advancement, such as ALDinHE's Certified Practitioner accreditation and ALT's CMALT Accreditation Framework. These professional bodies set out clear values and adopt a role of advocacy, celebration and development; they create invaluable networks for individuals within their specific area or profession. For example, BALEAP's (2024) 'About Us' section states that: 'BALEAP supports the professional development of those involved in learning, teaching, scholarship and research in English for Academic Purposes'. Similarly, SEDA aim to achieve their core mission by offering developmental opportunities and resources, including, 'Professional Development' and 'Conference and Events' amongst their list of activities (SEDA, 2024). These associations, therefore, play a fundamental role in empowering, defining and sustaining the professional identity of distinct third spaces professionals, such as Academic or Educational Developers, Learning Developers, Technicians and EAP tutors. As an example, the creation and promotion of a Learning Developer professional identity has been a particular concern for Learning Developers and is clearly reflected in their research (Murray and Glass 2011; Johnson, 2018; Webster, 2024). We wholeheartedly recognise the integral role that professional associations have played and continue to play in driving the careers and development of individuals within their related third space professions.

We would argue, however, that an unintended consequence of this has been a hardening of individual and isolated professional identities within the third space that has become divisive. This bounded approach (that understandably arose out of a need for preservation and recognition) has not thereby encouraged or made explicit a potential for wider collaboration or career movement *within* and across the third space. In this way, we suggest that the associations, and the wider professional identities they represent, have unwittingly marked out isolated or separate 'territories' for themselves. As a result, there

are limited, formal opportunities for collaboration and exchange between the different territories and their respective associations, which actively encourage the crossing of third space boundaries. Opening the borders between our respective fields could enable interaction and exchange between Technicians, Learning Technologists, EAP Educators and others, for example, to create a more holistic and interconnected third space domain. It could encourage diverse career trajectories between and across different third space professions, giving us the unique opportunity to co-create a model for potential progression *within* the third space itself (to some extent).

At present, when an individual seeks to travel between different third space territories to make a progressive career change, they are forced to drop one clearly 'defined' third space identity to undertake another. As a result, individuals must sacrifice much of their previous identity, research, profile and connections to progress their careers in what is frustratingly conceived as a new sphere, or separate field. Relinquishing one's valued nexus and hard-earned reputation occurs despite the fact that, anecdotally, movement between Learning Development and Academic Development, for example, is a well-trodden path. Grayson (2024) discusses the challenges inherent in making such a move between third space professions (in this instance from Learning Development to Academic Development), and the upset caused when attention was drawn to the number of senior figures in Learning Development who actually work in other third space areas, and in the words of poet Lemn Sissay: 'We have more in common than sets us apart'. The response to this article from many third space colleagues also spoke of the frustration in having to 'start over' and re-build their reputation, connections and standing. When the aforementioned article was published, respected former Learning Developer, now Educational Development Consultant, Helen Webster got in touch to say: '...your summary about the indignation of having to rebuild my reputation and lose much of what I'd cultivated really struck a chord'. Another third space colleague, Kevin Ingham, who recently moved from Technician to Learning Technologist and Lecturer also got in touch to say: 'This is a fantastic article, Nicola, and resonates with my own career journey, as someone who was (and is) a technician to my core, but had to move away as there were zero progression opportunities, and now I am in two 'hybrid practitioner' roles so that I can still keep myself working in a classroom with students'. There were many other responses, but these showcase that the problem extends far beyond the lived experience of the current authors alone.

We contend, that establishing and increasing connections between our professional associations could help to link seemingly disparate third space territories more tightly together and create more explicit pathways and varied career trajectories between and across the full spectrum of our third space professions. In this vein, we certainly agree with Lawrence's (2022, p.230) notion that 'flexibility is central to sustaining a career in the third space', and we maintain, that increased connection and collaboration between professional associations might help to encourage individuals to envisage what this flexibility might look like to shape and support their own career trajectories.

Conclusion: a call for greater collaboration!

The majority of third space professional associations already have 'collaboration' as one of their core values or themes. For example, SEDA, in its list of six main activities outlines that:

With its strong commitment to partnerships, SEDA is always open to collaborations which can advance its purposes. Over the years, SEDA has either led or been a partner in a variety of projects which have contributed to the improvement of teaching and learning (SEDA, 2024)

Similarly, ALDinHE (2024) lists its partners, which are all counterpart Learning Development associations across the globe. Surprisingly, and to the point of this opinion piece, the associations do not mention other third space associations as partners despite the ever-present 'apologies for cross-posting' we see across the respective mailing lists (see LDHEN and SEDA mailing lists for one example) and examples of particularly strong cross-association collaboration such as the jointly published Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education Special Issue on Academic Literacies in 2019.

Therefore, we issue a 'Call for Collaboration' amongst and between third-space professional associations that will build on our established, shared values and present opportunities for professionals within the respective fields to integrate, connect, network and share. Increased cross-association exchange could secure a firm position for our professional associations as key drivers in advancing third space professional cultural exchange which is often seen as a key characteristic of the third space itself (McIntosh

and Nutt, 2022). The range of collaborations could build on already established activities within individual associations, with potential examples including:

- Research funding to support cross-profession projects.
- Joint conferences and/or TeachMeets.
- Collaborative special issues in respective association-linked journals and blogs.
- Informed pathways and models to support and shape third space career development.

These activities could be funded by the respective associations pooling a section of their annual budget or by holding a joint annual or special interest group meeting focused on progression and third space careers. It would be prudent to ask members to vote on potential options for collaboration to see what might work for them and allow for co-creation and partnership. Alternatively, a joint steering group across associations comprising members from each to formalise representation and enable us to connect and share would facilitate a holistic, unified approach. It would add weight to our concerns around progression and could help us to take an organised approach to identify potential opportunities moving forwards or lobby HEIs for structural change that more appropriately reflects the value of our contributions. Increasing these collaborative activities and connections between associations would help to create a more interconnected community across the third space itself, and it would open up, and make visible, varied career opportunities, pathways and trajectories for all third space professionals. It would allow individuals to see that other roles within the third space may allow them to progress whilst still pursuing their interests, maintaining their values and developing their expertise through adaptability and flexibility (Nutt, 2022). Indeed, the third space itself is characterised by the notions of hybridity and integrated practice (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022; Grayson and Syska, 2024). Therefore, we argue its many professional associations could reflect, champion, promote and enable this more effectively.

Cross-association collaboration has the added benefit of ensuring the third space remains a collegial and collaborative sphere, which often stands in a positive contrast to the individualistic and competitive nature of so many other areas of HE (Holley, 2023). In our combined lived experience (in moving from Learning Development to Academic Development) once an individual has made a third space shift, they must also shift their professional identity and connections from the 'old' to the 'new' association, members,

connections and trends. The shift in identity undoubtedly carries an emotional load as the nature of our roles often means they are integrally connected to our personal values, which are intertwined with our professional identity, reputation and community standing. Resultant feelings of disconnection and loss upon transitioning from one role to another, and the importance of collaboration in helping to overcome this, has similarly been reported in relation to academic identities (Gillaspy and Hunter, 2023). Closer links between professional associations and opportunities for cross-collaboration could help mitigate some of this loss for individuals by helping us build a greater collaborative unity. Reconceptualising our individual spheres as part of a wider third-space community would enable us to retain and enhance our individual emergent identities, experiences and skills whilst building a stronger collective identity for our wider community of third space professionals.

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