

What is Third Space? Definition, developments, challenges and opportunities

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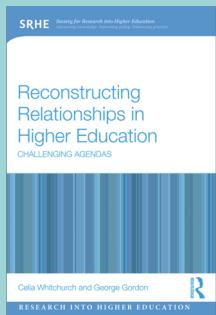
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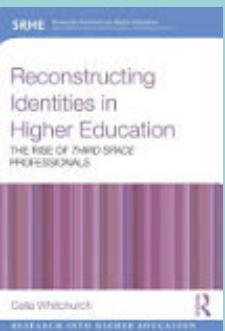
A Delicate Balance: Optimising Individual Aspirations and Institutional Missions in Higher Education

Celia Whitchurch, William Locke, Giulio Marini (March 2019)
Project 3.2 Working Paper 45 <http://www.researchcghe.org>



Reconstructing Relationships in Higher Education: Challenging agendas

Celia Whitchurch and George Gordon (SRHE Routledge 2017) drawing on Staffing Models and Institutional Flexibility (LFHE Project) and Meeting the Staff Development Needs of the Changing Academic Workforce (HEA Project)



Reconstructing Identities in Higher Education: The Rise of Third Space Professionals

Celia Whitchurch (SRHE Routledge 2013) drawing on Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures (LFHE Project)

Contexts: a changing academic workforce



- Significant numbers of staff have worked in other sectors/move in and out, therefore more mobility/fluidity
- Increasing awareness of impact in research and of the overall student experience eg employability
- Mismatch between formal understandings of institutional policy and ways in which these are interpreted in practice eg proportions of T/R/KE
- Structures such job descriptions often inaccurate
- This can lead to ‘hidden’ activity + ‘mis-recognition’
- Management roles increasingly regarded as a path to promotion eg of a teaching or research programme

Examples of ‘Third Space’ roles

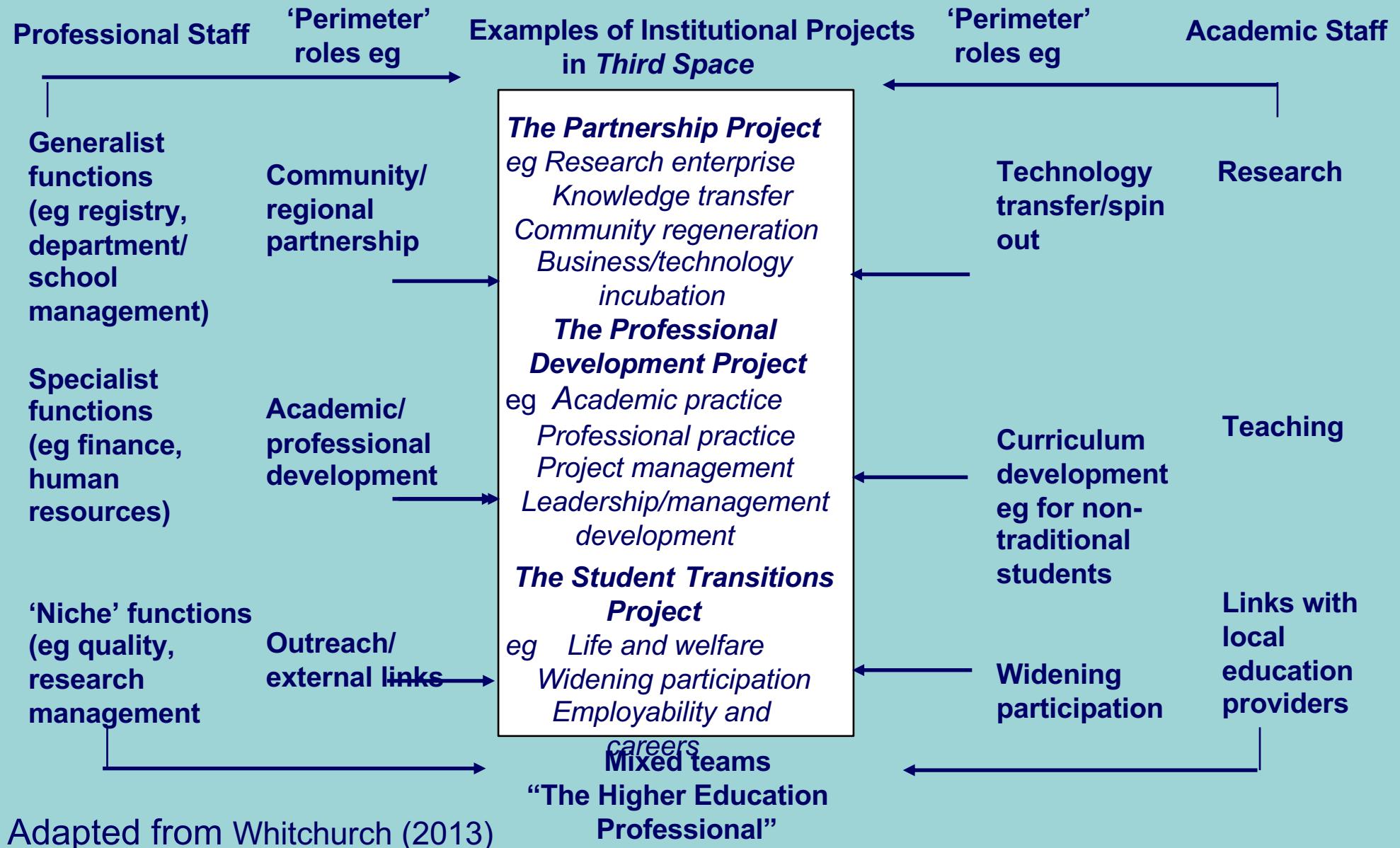


- *Research management* eg knowledge exchange, incubation and spin out, preparation of bids, relationships with funding partners, database development
- *Public engagement* eg employer links, workplace learning, regional and public agency development
- *Learning support* eg tutoring, programme design/documentation, academic literacy, research into educational practice, educational technology
- *Online learning* eg online programme design/development/adaptation, social media
- *Institutional research* into and reflection on eg student recruitment/outcomes, employability

The concept of *Third Space*

- Concept from cultural theory to explore spatial relationships as opposed to cumulative/historic accounts of human/organisational behaviour
- Spatial relationships seen as more significant than structures (social networks across formally recognised spaces)
- Provides for new voices and perspectives, making the invisible visible, the implicit explicit
- Epitomised by eg younger generations being less bound by formal career structures, more proactive in interpreting/developing roles, taking a portfolio approach

The Emergence of *Third Space*



Four 'lenses'

- Roles not necessarily specified in job descriptions or HR career structures, but evolve... not only to support and facilitate, but also to promote and develop institutional activity, characterised by
- Working in new ***Spaces***
- Developing new kinds of (mode 2, applied) institutional ***Knowledge***
- Developing new ***Relationships*** (internal, external, lateral, hierarchical, networked...)
- Establishing ***Legitimacy*** for themselves and their work

Spaces

- Working at interfaces/ambiguous conditions
- Therefore managing plural environments
- “Sometimes an academic unit, sometimes an office” (learning partnerships manager)
- Turning this to advantage...
- Safe space in which to be creative/experiment
but (the ‘dark side’ of Third Space...)
- May be outside mainstream structures, communication channels, checks and balances
- More self-reliance, less security

Knowledges

- Applied, evidence-based (Mode 2) knowledge eg research into student learning
- Contextual/cross-boundary knowledge: “It’s not enough just to know how to be able to be an accountant... or to manage staff... in order to be effective within a university you need to understand the context.” (faculty manager)
- Understanding different constituencies - students, staff, faculty/institution management teams
- Contribution to knowledge of eg research management/new forms of pedagogy as academic field (publications, conference papers...)

Relationships

- “if you get the relationships right everything else falls into place” (educational technologist)
- General flattening of organisational relationships
- Complex issues require complex solutions therefore teams needed with range of expertise
- Staff gaining responsibility eg for teams and projects earlier in careers
- Concept of partnership with, rather than management of, or service to, academic colleagues

Legitimacies

- Credibility likely to be built on basis of non-positional, personal authority/agency: “There’s no authority that you come with” (planning manager)
- Ability to participate in debate with academic colleagues: “learning to divorce argument from people” (teaching and learning manager)
- Appreciating different academic/professional work “rhythms”
- Attitude of academic colleagues that “If you solve a problem for us, we’ll come back and work with you again” (teaching and learning manager)

Issues and challenges for individuals



- Interface between academic and professional staff...
- Status of *Third Space* work: “I’m a director but I’m not a director... the extent of my authority and jurisdiction is unclear...” (enterprise manager)
- “you’re not regarded as a real academic, and yet I’ve probably done more as an academic than many academics have done this year... the research I’m doing... [is seen] as dirty, and not as real academic stuff” (research partnerships manager). ‘Permission to publish’...
- Whether to stay in *Third Space*; move out of HE; take eg faculty responsibility for T&L; aim for Chair in academic practice or vice-rectorship; pursue MBA, doctorate?

Issues and challenges for institutions



- More flexible career frameworks eg career climbing frame eg University of Southampton
- New career tracks eg knowledge exchange pathway eg University of Strathclyde
- Role design: “roles need to be continually challenging to avoid boredom... or... turnover” (Knight & Lightowler 2010)
- Encouraging shared practice: “working at the interface of research supporter, community engager and scholar”
(Grove et al 2018)
- Providing authority eg to negotiate with external agencies
- Mentoring, secondments, professional development...

Questions

- Why does Third Space tend to be recognised only by those within it...?
- How can it be legitimised more widely?
- Can it be created where it doesn't exist?
- Are we all Third Space now?

References

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