

This is the submitted version of an article which has been accepted for publication in the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (In press).

Revisiting principles of partnership working in the third space.

Julie Blackwell Young and Sarah Parkes

Abstract

Initially discussed by Parkes, Blackwell Young and Cleaver (2016), this opinion piece revisits five principles of partnership working in the context of third space working. These emphasised a need for understanding motivations for collaboration; the necessity of strategic support; provision of suitable reward and recognition systems; developing a culture that embraces change and through honesty and openness.

The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed significant shifts within higher education, prompting institutions to re-evaluate their approaches to partnership working. Despite challenges, collaborative efforts across institutional domains gained prominence, underlining the strategic importance of third space professionals in facilitating agile decision-making and solution implementation. Amidst uncertainties, third space professionals demonstrated resilience and adaptability, navigating the pandemic's complexities while addressing the tandem feelings of messiness and uncertainty. They cultivated open mindsets and embraced a playful praxis that emerged as essential strategies for fostering trust and facilitating social learning amidst change. However, recognition and reward for such professionals remain complex, being often hindered by the fluidity of their roles and the fragmented nature of institutional acknowledgment. It is the authors' contention that the culture evident during the pandemic that fostered meaningful collaborative practices and amplified the importance of third space professionals is in danger of being lost. If Universities are to be successful in addressing the ever-evolving 'wicked' problems roaming the higher education landscape, a sustainable collective approach underpinned by the five principles remain.

Keywords:

COVID19. Partnership. Third Space. Collaboration. Principles for Practice

Between 2012 and 2014, Elizabeth Cleaver, Kenny Archibald and the authors of this opinion piece investigated partnership working between academic and professional staff (Parkes et al., 2014). This work identified the role of third-space professionals in facilitating collaborations across institutional boundaries in Higher Education (HE) within the United Kingdom (UK). Insights from Whitchurch (2013) and Mcfarlane (2011) shed light on the nature of such roles, their work and consequent impact on universities. In our chapter "Making partnerships work: practical strategies for building successful collaborations" (Parkes, Blackwell Young & Cleaver, 2016), we outlined five principles for effective partnership working:

1. Understand motivations for developing the partnership, and the extent to which they may go on to help or hinder the development and sustainability of collaborations.
2. Recognise that strategic support is necessary if partnerships are to be successful and sustainable to affect institutional change.
3. Ensure suitable reward and/or recognition systems are in place for staff and students involved in partnership activities.
4. Recognise the organic nature of change and prepare those involved for feelings of messiness, uncertainty, and anxiety.
5. Develop a culture of honesty, openness, and disclosure to underpin the workings of each partnership.

In this opinion piece we more fully conceptualise these principles in relation to third-space professionals. To do this we revisit the context for those principles back in 2012-14, consider how these principles played out during the pandemic and what that means for the current and future role of the third space professional.

The pre-pandemic scene

Catalysed by the diversification of university student demographics following UK educational reforms in the 1990s, such as the creation of post-92 institutions; the Widening Participation agenda and introduction of fees, the rise of student experience rhetoric across Higher Education (HE) highlighted the need for integrated practices (Parkes et al., 2014). This shift led to a growing recognition of the importance of collaboration across various university departments, such as careers, learning development, and library support, which were previously regarded as separate from the academic aspects of the university experience. Liz Thomas's influential work emphasized the significance of this collaborative approach as vital to student success (2012) and underpinned Principle 1 around motivations for partnership and the importance of strategic support.

In 2017, the Higher Education Research Act established the Office for Students in England, intensifying the focus on value for money and student-as-consumer narratives. Despite variations in drivers across the UK, discussions on impact and value for money have persisted (see MacFarlane, 2017, Gimyah, 2018; House of Lords, 2018; Scottish Funding Council, 2021; QAA Scotland, n.d.). Drawing on scholars such as Freire (1968; 2013), hooks (1994), and Collini (2012), narratives of the student-as-consumer were, and continue to be resisted (see Zepke, 2018; Seal, 2021). These instead argue for a conception of HE as a transformational experience concerned with the development of critical thinking, self-awareness, and exposure to diverse perspectives rather than as a financial transaction. These dynamics underscored the importance of third space professionals possessing a comprehensive understanding of various institutional activities related to the student experience, with strategic support emerging, if albeit inconsistently implemented (Principle 2).

Despite the growing importance of third space professionals and collaborative work, our 2014 analysis highlighted that 'promotion and reward structures may not have evolved to take into account such collaborative work' (Principle 3). Third space work often falls outside traditional research paradigms, and this ultimately led to challenges in recognition and reward. As Blackwell Young and Millard (2023) discuss, at this time there was an emerging body of work around partnership with students (for example, Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011; Millard et al, 2013; Healey, 2014) that was driven largely by third space professionals. Many in our original study felt that organicity was a feature of successful collaborative works, that brought with it a sense of messiness that heightened anxiety (Principle 4). In recognition of this, the 2014 project emphasised the importance of open communications (Principle 5) to address any perception of chaos and/or uncertainty. Underscoring this principle is a requirement for transparency from institutional leadership to foster trust so that a unified sense of purpose is cultivated. We now explore how these principles fared during and beyond the pandemic.

During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant upheaval across higher education, prompting a profound transformation in how institutions operated. The implementation of UK lockdown measures in March 2020 necessitated a fundamental shift in supporting learning, teaching, and assessment practices within HE. Universities understood the motivations for developing their practices (Principle 1), with the pandemic re-orienting institutional focus from issues of quantification, performativity, and value for money towards building collaborative efforts aimed at supporting student success amidst unprecedented challenges.

This shift underscored the strategic importance of third-space professionals (Principle 2), with senior managers increasingly relying on their expertise for agile decision-making and rapid implementation of solutions. As a result, the voice and status of third-space professionals were recognised and amplified (Principle 3),

emphasising the need for distributed leadership and adaptability. This elevation in status positioned them as essential catalysts for change within higher education institutions (for example, Singer et al., 2021). Throughout the pandemic, third-space professionals leveraged their knowledge, expertise, and extensive networks to lead and facilitate critical conversations, both internally and externally, serving as 'positive disruptors' in navigating the complexities of the crisis (Akerman, 2020). Insights from Quinsee (2022) further illustrate the pivotal role of third-space leadership during times of crisis, with these professionals being increasingly involved in strategic discussions and operational planning, including contingency measures and the transition to online operations.

During covid, the rapid pace of the pivot to online working necessitated swift action; a process that often felt messy and organic. Maybe because of the scale of the pandemic, such mess or chaos was more accepted. Hughes, Cureton, and Jones (2021) discuss feelings of chaos in navigating university systems and processes during this time, particularly as regulatory changes were swiftly implemented to accommodate unprecedented student need. Despite this inherent uncertainty, third-space professionals demonstrated remarkable adaptability in managing the evolving landscape and supporting others in how to adapt to feelings of messiness, uncertainty, and anxiety (Principle 4). Their familiarity with navigating such complexities and managing uncertainty potentially mitigated any discomfort felt, although it's important to acknowledge the toll this may have taken on their own overall well-being. In response to this uncertainty, openness and transparency (Principle 5) emerged as vital components for effective collaboration among staff and students. Institutions found themselves compelled to unite across all domains, driven by a collective sense of vulnerability and the imperative for mutual support. Third-space professionals played a pivotal role in fostering such transparency and collaboration, sharing their expertise, and facilitating sector-wide discourse through various online platforms and events (for example, see *Pedagogy and Pancakes* by Chris Headland, 2024).

The pandemic served as a levelling force, distributing control, and fostering a sense of shared ownership and partnership working across the higher education sector. In Scotland particularly, where a culture of openness and collaboration was already ingrained, existing networks facilitated rapid collaborative efforts, aided by established trust and cross-institutional relationships. Institutions thus embraced new working methodologies and a strengthening of cross-institutional ties.

Post-Pandemic

So where does that leave third space professionals and the 2016 principles in a post-pandemic world? Have we managed to capitalise on some of the positives coming out of the pandemic? Certainly, the rationale for collaborative efforts and third space working across institutional domains remains evident (Principle 1), if only to attend to such issues of student well-being, addressing the cost-of-living crisis,

and facilitating the success of the 'Covid' cohort whose educational experiences to date have been disrupted.

While the pandemic presented formidable challenges, it also catalysed opportunities for collaboration and third space working across institutional domains from senior leadership, engendering strategic support (Principle 2). The imperative to attend to such wicked, complex problems in HE such as student retention, engagement, progression, decolonisation, and mental wellbeing has propelled strategic efforts, although their implementation may vary across institutions.

Ensuring suitable recognition and reward for third space professionals (Principle 3) remains complex due to the fluidity of their roles, which often transcend conventional organisational boundaries of research, teaching, services, administration, or knowledge transfer (Whitchurch, 2013). Despite external accolades (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022b), internal acknowledgment within institutions can be fragmented, hindering career progression. This indicates a discrepancy in acknowledging their work compared to more 'traditional' roles (Black, 2024). Indeed, Akerman's (2020) 'institutional blindness' continues wherein 'non-academic' roles, pivotal during crises like the pandemic, have faded into obscurity afterward, despite their significant impact as 'positive disruptors' (Akerman in Hulme, 2022).

Amidst uncertainties, third space professionals have demonstrated resilience and adaptability during the pandemic. Our earlier work acknowledged that some struggle with feelings of messiness that often accompany change and uncertainty. It remains the case to acknowledge this, addressing the accompanying feelings of messiness and uncertainty to support people in navigating change effectively (Principle 4). Holford tells us that cultivating open mindsets and embracing playful praxis can foster trust and facilitate social learning (2002, pp. 472-6). This demonstrates that what matters, as exemplified in the pandemic, are the relationships we experience, being composite of those small, micro-moments (Taylor, 2017) that complexity theory tells us are collectively impactful (Boulton et al, 2015). We must not lose our awareness of the importance of this.

The pandemic fostered a culture of honesty and openness in practice (Principle 5), which we must preserve. Reverting to siloed working environments undermines our collaborative efforts that proved effective during this crisis. Cross-sector openness, particularly evident in the Scottish sector, has been a strength and should be further cultivated. Yet, it is our contention that the transformative potential of pandemic-induced changes remains underappreciated, emphasizing the need for compassionate practices that embrace change and uncertainty for individual and collective flourishing. By doing so, we can prepare and develop an adaptable HE environment that is better equipped to navigate the complexities of an ever-evolving world.

Final thoughts

As we move forward, the publication of such work like McIntosh and Nutt (2022a) as well as the existence of this special issue suggests that there is now a confidence in people feeling happy to be described as a third space, boundary spanning or unbounded professional that perhaps was not as clear in our initial 2014 project. Perhaps we are seeing a greater acceptance of the 'unself' within professional identity (Quinn in Parkes, 2018) that is seen as a core strength. Indeed, in a complex world that is an uncertain and unpredictable place (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984, p.310; Allen and Boulton, 2011, p. 166), we must acknowledge that patterns of relationships that on the surface seem stable, are yet multiplicitous of constant micro-changes. It is only when larger scale changes occur with new patterns, or where the self-organisation of relationships emerge, that we notice them (Boulton, et al, 2015, p. 8). This requires us to look at the ways in which we operate synergistically in relationship with each other to produce a whole that is different from the sum of its parts; '...to think in terms of relationships, in terms of interconnections, patterns, and context' (Evitts, Seale, & Skybrook in Boulton et al, 2015, p. 3). If we accept this way of thinking about the world and our institutions, then effective collaborative practices that we contend at the forefront of a third space professional skillset, are inherently a 'good thing' that enable us to attend to those 'wicked' problems we find ourselves contending with. The process of revisiting our principles shows that these are as relevant now in underpinning our work as ever. If we are to work with such issues of decolonisation, mental wellbeing, climate change, and social justice, amplifying, recognising, and rewarding the skills of third space professionals should be our default setting.

About the authors

Dr. Julie Blackwell Young is currently Head of Teaching Quality and Learning Enhancement in the Abertay Learning Enhancement Academy. Here, she works with staff and students across the university to enhance academic practice and the student learning experience. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and part of her role is to oversee the university's Advance HE accredited Fellowship provision.

Dr. Sarah Parkes works at Birmingham Newman University as a Senior lecturer in Higher Education Practice. She teaches and supports learners across a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate courses and leads the university's Post Graduate Certificate in HE Practice and CPD route to PSF 2023 Fellowship. She is a 2020 National Teaching Fellow; Senior Fellow of the UK's Higher Education Academy; Newman Distinguished Teaching Fellow 2018 and an Advance HE CATE 2019 award winner.

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