

Inhabiting the ‘Third-Space’ in Higher Education: A case study on how educational technologists navigate this space in an Irish university

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Abstract

This institutional-level case study explores the experiences of educational technologists working in an Irish university. The concept of the ‘third-space’ is used to understand the space which crosses pedagogical, technological, and academic fields in which educational technologists work. Drawing on Whitchurch’s typologies of ‘third-space’ higher educational professionalism the paper reflects on the actual experiences of educational technologists who inhabit this space. It reveals their job realities as they seek to carve out their role and legitimise their identities within existing university structures. The author advocates for universities to enable more supportive structures conducive to educational technologists working effectively and developing professionally and responsively within the contemporary higher education landscape. To conclude, the practical implications, limitations and further research opportunities are highlighted in the context of the study.

Keywords

Third-space, higher education, educational technologists, learning technologists, professional identity

1. Introduction

The past two decades comprised of significant changes in higher education in Ireland and globally (Graham, 2013; National Forum, 2016). As universities have expanded and diversified to meet the demands of the contemporary world, so too have their staff with new roles and groups of professionals (Whitchurch, 2008, 2012). Higher education has embraced the integration of technologies to support multiple modes of learning. Changing technological needs have contributed to an increased demand for educational technology professionals (Macfarlane, 2011; Nworie, 2022) with various roles evolving organically within the Irish university sector (National Forum, 2016).

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This study employs the concept of the ‘third-space’ (Bhabha, 2012) as a framework for analysis of the experiences of educational technologists. The term ‘third-space’ originates from Bhabha (2012), it is a metaphor for the in-between space in which two cultures intersect (Smith et al., 2021). Whitchurch (2008) a prolific researcher on the identities and changing roles of professional staff transferred this notion to higher education. An Irish university, the workplace of the researcher, serves as the context for a case study exploring how educational technologists navigate the ‘third space’. From an organisational perspective, Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) is the responsibility of the Registrar/Deputy President’s office, with TEL-related activities delivered as part of the university’s education strategy. The support of TEL is split across central support units in addition to a network of educational technologists located at school and college levels (colleges and their constituent schools make up the academic structures of the university). As part of this devolved model, the provision of TEL support is at the discretion of individual colleges and schools. The current institutional structures can be challenging in achieving consistent and effective pedagogical integration of TEL. There is a cross-institutional network for educational technologists of which the researcher holds a coordination role. The author is an insider in the research, currently in an educational technology coordination role within the university’s Centre for Teaching and Learning.

The central thesis of this paper is that educational technologists are navigating an often challenging third-space environment. Their lived experience illuminates the realities of the role. Drawing on scholarly knowledge of third-space professionals the author argues for more institutional supporting structures and leadership so these professionals can develop, progress and ultimately legitimise their places in higher education. The overarching research question (RQ) is: How do three educational technologists working in an Irish university navigate the third-space in higher education? Two sub-questions guide the study as follows:

RQ1: How do their lived experiences, the structures and practices they encounter while engaging in this space support or limit their work?

RQ2: How is their role, professional identity and development impacted?

2. Literature Review

Much has been written about the identity of academics (Behari-Leak & Le Roux, 2018; Caldwell, 2022) including those who move from practice to academia (Dickinson et al., 2022) less attention has been given to exploring the identities of professionals in higher education (Whitchurch, 2008). In addition, there has been little research into the contributions of professional staff to learning and teaching (Graham, 2013), or the challenges they encounter. So far there is a lack of studies of educational technologists specific to the Irish third-space university context. Although a small-scale research study it seeks to offer some insights into how the roles of educational technologists are experienced in an Irish higher education environment thus extending knowledge and contributing to the noticeable gap in the literature. From the selected scholarly literature three key interrelated themes emerge; third-space in higher education, professional identity and educational technologists as blended professionals.

2.1 ‘Third-Space’ in Higher Education

Studies conducted in the UK, US, Canada and Australia have identified third-space roles in higher education as those crossing academic and professional functions (Whitchurch, 2008, 2012). Third-space professional staff include those employed in areas such as learning and teaching, research management, student services, community engagement, and strategic initiatives (Smith et al., 2021) and those in specialist roles such as finance, human resources, and IT services (Whitchurch, 2008). The literature offers a new way to think beyond traditional activities which are often viewed in binary terms; of an academic domain and an administrative domain which supports it (Whitchurch, 2008; Smith et al., 2021). The third-space remains a reality in universities, Hall (2022) argues that the pandemic-generated pivot to online learning required a mix of academics, administrators and educational technology professionals to provide online learning. The question arises is there an opportunity for university leaders to leverage third-space professionals to ensure quality and innovation in learning (Zellweger-Moser & Bachmann, 2010) while contributing to the post-pandemic reimagining of higher education (Hall, 2022).

2.2 Professional Identity

The boundaries between ‘academic’ and ‘professional’ identities in higher education are becoming increasingly blurred (Macfarlane, 2011; Whitchurch, 2008). In the literature, various terms describe professional staff such as non-academic (Graham, 2013; Sebalj et al., 2012), blended professionals (Whitchurch, 2008), hybrid professionals (Veles & Carter, 2016), para-academic staff (Macfarlane, 2011) and pracademics (Dickinson et al., 2022; Posner, 2009). In some universities, professional staff are defined as what they are not (non-academic) which is often a source of tension and can make for uneasy relations with some faculty (Sebalj et al., 2012; Szekeres, 2011). The term ‘non-academic’ can be perceived as divisive, indicating academic staff are of primary significance and others are of lesser importance (Sebalj et al., 2012). Whitchurch (2008) identifies four categories of professional identity in the third-space: bounded professionals, cross-boundary professionals, unbounded professionals and blended professionals. In this context blended professionals are key, they work across professional and academic boundaries. Obexer (2022) proposes blended professionals have varied backgrounds and their positions in the structure of a university are often awkward. To date, some professional staff have indicated they feel invisible in their institutions (Akerman, 2020) and perceive their work as less important than that of their academic colleagues (Caldwell, 2022; Szekeres, 2011).

2.3 Educational Technologists as Blended Professionals

Although third-space roles can exist among academics (Behari-Leak & Le Roux, 2018; Smith et al., 2021), this study focuses on professional staff (Sebalj et al., 2012), and more specifically educational technologists. Educational technologists or TEL workers often find themselves operating in university third-space environments (Mitchell et al., 2017). Their hybrid roles involve them acting as brokers between academic and professional fields transitioning from offering technical support to contributing to curriculum design or working as collaborators on institutional projects (Veles et al., 2019). The third-space can be precarious and have implications for educational technologists in terms of professional credibility and future career paths (Mitchell et al., 2017; Obexer, 2022; Shurville et al., 2009; Whitchurch, 2008). Whitchurch (2012) claims supportive line managers have a significant role in addressing the professional development needs of educational technologists thus

ensuring the third-space does not become a cul-de-sac. To confirm legitimacy in the third-space, Obexer (2022) advocates it can be enabled through organisational structures, meaningful work and support from line managers. Akerman (2020) argues that the attainment of new knowledge should not only be the responsibility of third space professionals themselves, but institutions should actively support them in this regard.

3. Research Design and Methods

This study applies the concept of the third-space (Bhabha, 2012; Whitchurch, 2008) as a theoretical framework to provide a basis for analysis. Third-space theory has a recent yet burgeoning history in the field of TEL. Jordan and Elsdon-Clifton (2014) illustrate its potential to provide a lens to examine the complexities of education technology. It is relevant to this study which seeks to understand the experiences of educational technologists, by the nature of their roles where they inhabit a third-space environment. Guided by the tenets of Whitchurch's (2008, 2012) categorisation of identities of professional staff the category of 'blended professionals' is apt in the context of educational technologists who have mixed backgrounds of professional experience and academic activity. Whitchurch's (2012) framework is utilised to present the findings in the context of how educational technologists navigate spaces, their relationships with faculty, how they develop knowledge and their sense of legitimacy.

A case study methodology was taken as appropriate to the specific real-life case offering deeper insights into a socially complex situation such as this study addresses. (Cohen et al., 2017; Yin, 2018). The third-space concept is used to gain insights into the experience of educational technologists, it is appropriate given this study explores experiences and interactions, rather than measuring or quantifying them. A qualitative approach was adopted, using semi-structured interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis of the dataset was guided by the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2012) to generate codes and define themes which addressed the research questions. This reflexive approach aligns with the researcher's aforementioned position as an insider in the research and is commensurate with their active role in knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Educational Research Ethics Committee, Lancaster University, UK. Written consent was gained from all participants whose identities are disguised with the findings referring only to them as Participant 1/2/3 (P1, P2, P3).

4. Findings

4.1 Relationships with Faculty

Participants perceived being deployed at the local school level as beneficial for enabling opportunities to work directly with faculty and to establish and maintain professional relationships. Although it was evident a plethora of activities were undertaken there was consensus that the primary function of their role is faculty support focusing on learning design. As demonstrated by the following narrative working alongside faculty was identified by one participant as challenging; *'I've had to constantly fight small battles about the push-back on using educational technologies and there is tension with some academics'* (P2). Some frustrations were expressed with the expectation from faculty for educational technologists to complete administrative tasks. All reported they were sometimes expected to do administrative tasks in the virtual learning environment (VLE). Also, a source of tension

was that some colleagues still perceived them as a technical support role, with some faculty seeing them as *'someone to fix the printer'* or a *'tech guru'*. They concluded there was a lack of understanding of the role among some line managers and university leaders despite the existence of an institutional job role and description.

4.2 Navigating at the School Level

There was consensus among participants on the importance of supportive line managers. Two participants experienced unclear reporting lines, whereby they had two line managers (i.e., an academic and an administrative head). One participant described the practical problems associated with being line managed by *'both sides of the house'* but noted the flip side was it provided a certain freedom to move between the academic and professional spaces, which was sometimes *'liberating and professionally satisfying.'* School-level teaching and learning committees supported the work of educational technologists. However, it was evident not all school structures were consistent and some commented that working with these committees was contingent on the personalities involved and on individual's views on TEL. Participants identified some drawbacks of a devolved institutional TEL support structure: a single educational technologist located in each school could potentially lead to isolation and some duplication of work.

4.3 Navigating at the Institutional Level

Despite valuing the cross-institutional network of educational technologists, participants highlighted a lack of institutional structures to support TEL and their roles. Participants perceived the university leadership as not focused on the development of TEL which often made for a challenging work environment. P1 suggested that *'TEL is after all a pillar of the institutional education strategy so it would be beneficial if the university would appoint a senior academic who is research active in TEL to lead this space.'* The establishment of educational technologist roles was also identified as problematic. Typically, roles are created on a short-term or temporary contractual basis and often educational technologists are appointed to an individual school or specific funded project. It was suggested that the temporary nature of roles left individuals insecure, with no option but to do what is asked of them while making a case for their role in the longer term. It was observed that to an extent the structure confines educational technologists to work in silos largely focusing on meeting the immediate needs of their local schools/projects as opposed to the achievement of wider strategic institutional TEL objectives.

4.4 Sense of Legitimacy

Participants' professional sense of legitimacy was inspired by a genuine desire to enhance student learning, they perceived themselves in an optimal position *'to make a real difference to student learning'*. P3 commented that credibility was only gained through faculty appraisal, and another described how they had to leverage their educational background to gain credibility explaining there is a constant requirement to promote the role and convince academic colleagues of the benefits of TEL. P1 explained they had credibility locally within their role and were perceived as an expert in the field they believed that more broadly a low value was placed on the work of educational technologists across the university. Similarly, P2 observed how the culture revolved around research, led by faculty and the work of professional staff including educational technologists was not always valued they said; *'the*

role of professional staff is seen as lesser than, if you are not in an academic your role is seen as secondary to what an academic does'(P2).

4.5. Knowledge Development

There was consensus among participants that their professional development was not well supported by the university. They indicated the responsibility fell to them personally to pursue knowledge and they viewed the university's current approach to the development of educational technologists as falling short of providing any substantial development opportunities. A common sentiment expressed was that they must continually prove themselves, P2 concluded *'as an educational technologist you have to express, promote and create structures and make your own journey'*. P3 also experienced a lack of support observing that *'there are no established models or practices around progression or growth for us within the university you have to fight locally for training and professional development'*.

5. Discussion

This study reflects the findings of Smith et al. (2021) that the university third-space cannot be understood as a stand-alone phenomenon but involves complex individual and institutional contexts. In agreement with prior research (Obexer, 2022; Whitchurch, 2012), this study acknowledges the third-space may provide a degree of freedom enabling involvement in initiatives across the university, the findings confirm that uncertainties and lack of structures outweigh this. Participants encountered many complexities in navigating their university's third-space, findings inform the core argument that these professionals as others suggest have precarious positions within the university and are often operating in uncharted contexts (Obexer, 2022; Shurville et al., 2009). Although participants generally experienced supportive direct line management, there was consensus that the lack of broader university-level supporting TEL structures and leadership contributed to the complexities. The study confirms in agreement with the explored literature that there is still some ambiguity about the diverse activities and role of educational technologists (Fox & Sumner, 2014; National Forum, 2016; Shurville, 2009). Participants confirm they have moved away from the provision of technical support and are primarily involved in curriculum design, a similar finding was reported in previous research (Fox & Sumner, 2014; Zellweger-Moser & Bachmann, 2010). It is evident that there still appears to be a lack of understanding of the role among some faculty, line managers, and university leaders.

The findings echo those of Szekeres (2011), who also found some uneasy relationships between faculty and professional staff still exist. While on one hand, participants described positive working relationships with faculty it was also evident that some tensions and at times 'push-back' were experienced. The findings further support that the binary assumptions about 'academic' and 'non-academic' roles and identities still exist. Consistent with prior literature (Caldwell, 2022; Sebalij et al., 2012; Whitchurch, 2012) there is a sense that their work is perceived to be of less importance than that of faculty. This study replicates findings from previous research (Mitchell et al., 2017; Obexer, 2022; Veles et al., 2019; Whitchurch, 2008) which have implications for educational technologists' professional credibility and career paths. Given the uncertainty of the space in which they operate, it may encourage them to explore new professional relationships and innovative ways to engage (Veles et al., 2019). As Akerman (2020) described, this study found that third-space professionals are struggling to access knowledge to continue their career trajectories while there is an onus on them to

continually develop. Specific to the educational technologists' roles within the university, there is an apparent absence of supported professional development pathways or clear career progression routes. The significant challenges described can to some degree explain why these educational technologists are continually re-negotiating their identities and professional spaces. As Szekeres (2011) reports educational technologists still have some way to go to claim and legitimise their roles and place in the contemporary university.

6. Conclusion

As the introduction outlines, this study confirms a complex TEL landscape in the university, marked by complicated reporting structures, some faculty resistance, inadequate institutional TEL structures and professional development for educational technologists. The lived experiences of these professionals reveal that the reality of navigating the third-space is challenging. Given this, it is hardly surprising that these professionals are grappling with issues of professional identity, knowledge development, progression and a sense of legitimacy. The study demonstrates these professionals require more robust institutional structures, appropriate TEL leadership, and more meaningful professional development and career progression pathways if they are to continue to function as aspiring professionals. While it was beyond the scope of this study, deeper exploration is required on how educational technologists can be practically supported to successfully and sustainably work with faculty while also being appropriately recognised and leveraged within existing or newly formed university structures.

While the data from this study offers a meaningful snapshot within an institutional context, it is acknowledged that there are limitations to this small-scale study. The findings are locally context-dependent and indicative of only a subset of educational technologists and hence not necessarily representative of the wider cohort of educational technologists working across the university. Nevertheless, the study may resonate and offer insights to those engaged in third-space roles, and to other TEL practitioners and scholars both within and beyond the national sector. Further exploration is required to investigate whether the findings generalise to the contexts of other third-space professionals in higher education. The key outcomes may be transferable to professionals who seek a more secure professional identity, more progressive professional development or are on a similar quest to legitimise their place within universities. To conclude, further exploration into the roles and unique identities of professional support staff in the university third-spaces may inform how these professionals can be better supported and valued by the universities that employ them.

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