

## **The third-space professional: a reflective case study on maintaining relationships within a complex higher education institution**

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### **Abstract**

This paper showcases the work of Third Space professionals in a complex higher education (HE) setting, and specifically its impact on the building of trust relationships and innovative approaches. It makes use of a case-study methodological approach, reflecting on the experiences of various stakeholders within pilot phases. The findings reveal challenges related to maintaining trust relationships, which can be threatened by technician approaches. The reflective case study explores an innovative live-streaming project and the related pedagogical approaches by Instructional Design experts, as Third Space professionals, who have carved out a critical space within a HE setting. This investigation, and its related lessons, highlights that learning-and-teaching aspects, training and support, reconciliation of trust relationships, can be applied to Third Space professionals in other HE institutions.

### **Introduction**

Professional staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) are changing the nature of their work, as they continue to work across and outside specific boundaries. This is reflective of the emerging domain between academic and professional spheres, termed the *Third Space* (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 3). This study highlights that the Third Space professionals within HEIs are recognised as those individuals who operate within a support environment, which constitutes an important link between these two spheres. These blended professionals, engaged in work with fundamentals of both the 'professional and academic activity', are able to be more creative in less bounded settings (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 377). It is important that these academic institutions take advantage of the contributions that these staff members bring to current and future environments (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 396).

The Centre for Innovative Education and Communication Technologies (CIECT) team at UWC (University of the Western Cape), which constitutes Third Space professionals, have 'carved out a more critical space' (Szekeres, 2011) in the institution since it was first established in 2005. These professional roles entail more than dedicated training and support activities. They operate within the broader learning-and-teaching and research arenas by taking on a multitude of daily operational roles, including reflective practices, the application of innovative processes and engagement with important activities such as 'teaching students [and] institutional research and development' (Van Schalkwyk, Leibowitz, Herman, & Farmer, 2015, p. 13).











Engaging in a re-building process will involve re-emphasising the visibility of CIECT as a team, which has engraved a more significant space in the institution, and not just as professionals who are seen by academics to behave as ‘traffic wardens’ (in this case, abruptly stopping projects mid-way, and then proceeding when requested to do so) (Szekeres, 2011, p. 14).

### **Findings in relation to resistance and usefulness of technologies**

This case study reveals findings which corroborate earlier work by the authors, highlighting the concept of resistance to elearning adoption in a higher education institution. This relates to: coordinating various support activities; equipping the support team with relevant skills to support lecturers and students; and increasing awareness around lecturers’ perceptions and confidence towards adopting educational technologies at a specific time (Stoltenkamp, Kies, & Njenga, 2007).

In other research (Stoltenkamp & Siebrits, 2015), the authors reflected on the importance of mindset changes to overcome resistance or reluctance among lecturers to adopt learning technologies. These are addressed through the continuous drive of effective use of educational technologies; the application of eTools within specific disciplines over a continuum of time; related reiterative processes and approaches to areas of learning-and-teaching, research, community engagement and collaboration reflected through a systemic, non-linear framework.

Furthermore, these studies are aligned to recent work which still highlights that institutional resistance ‘is not unique to higher education, [but] it is especially prevalent in social systems such as universities which structurally are resistant to change’ (Bryant, Coombs, & Pazio, 2014, p. 1). Moreover, Bryant et al. (2014, p. 8) emphasise resistance, not in terms of technology and sharing of content, rather to aspects arising ‘from staff performance management, time poverty and aversion to risk’.

As in this case study, Watermeyer (2015, p. 344) observes how the ‘third space of academia’ has to deal with individuals resistant to change and innovation to support their academic practices. Pham (2016, p. 17) further emphasises resistance in relation to a focus on examination results rather than the ‘reform of teaching and learning practices’.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to demonstrate CIECT members as Third Space professionals who operate in areas ‘from which they might otherwise [have been] excluded’ (Van Schalkwyk, 2015, p. 14). Furthermore, this illustrates the fact that the Third Space is unlikely to occur simply by institutions ‘designing it in’, and that it depends on the combined initiative of individuals and institutions (Whitchurch, 2010, p. 20).

At the time of writing this paper, CIECT remains in the process of rebuilding trust relationships with those who have engaged in this project. This is further augmented by Whitchurch (2010, p. 21) who argues that ‘relationships rather than structures are at the heart of the way that Third Space works for individuals and institutions’ as is evident through this case study.

Although the lecturer (part-time-streaming satellite campus) indicated willingness to engage in a continuation of the project in the fourth term (2015), the head of the unit within the faculty had opted to rather employ a lecturer to conduct classes at the satellite campus. In addition, further attempts from the IDs to arrange the manual capturing and editing of the video footage, proved to be a logistical challenge. Therefore, as Whitchurch (2010, p. 13) summarises, ‘contributions [of Third Space professionals] are not always recognised and respected, or only after a lengthy period of building ... trust’.

It should be noted that positive engagements still exist between the CIECT team and lecturers in other areas of emerging technologies. However, this specific Digital lecture Capturing project was intended as a pivotal step towards the creation of a blueprint for further roll-out across faculties. Hence, trust relationships built by Third Space professionals can easily be undermined in relation to the difficulty of maintaining relationships in complex HEIs.

In future, research related to the Third Space professional will be aligned to the key concept of power blocs in academia otherwise, as Kincheloe (2008, p. 99) warns, ‘[e]ducators and other cultural workers who are unaware of this socio-political dynamic will be perpetually limited in their efforts to understand, provide for, and facilitate the empowerment of their subjugated students and clients’.

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