

HOW ACADEMICS LEARN (OR NOT!)

AN ADVENTURE IN SPACE AND TIME (AND MATTER)

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ABOUT ME



- **Worked in UK Higher Education for over 20 years**
 - Variety of Professional Services roles
- **Learning Technologist / Academic Developer (TEL)**
 - In post since August 2006
 - Grounded in pedagogy and pedagogic approaches (e.g. blended learning)
 - Thoughtful and meaningful mediation of technology to enable student learning
 - Critical and Research Informed Practice -> Research, Evaluation & Dissemination
- **Educational Content Developer**
- **Tutor / Mentor**
 - Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP)
 - MSc by Research
 - Researcher Development Programme (RDP)
- **Postgraduate Student (2013-2018)**
 - Doctorate in Education (EdD)
 - *The Professional Learning of Academics in Higher Education: A Sociomaterial Perspective*
(<http://create.canterbury.ac.uk/17640/>)
 - Graduated in January 2019

DEFINITION

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

ABOUT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING



Professional Development can be conceived as activities that are intended to engage professionals in new learning about their professional practice (McAlpine, 2006; Webster-Wright, 2009).

Whereas, **Professional Learning** is a continuous process that builds throughout a professional's entire career (Loughran, 2010). As such, professional learning “cannot be mandated, coerced or controlled, but can be supported, facilitated and shaped” (Webster-Wright, 2010).

Professional Development	Professional Learning
Organisation-driven	Learner-driven
Compliance	Agency
Transmission-led	Conversation-led
Episodic Engagement	Continuous Engagement
Learning as Acquisition	Learning as Becoming
Formal	Formal / Informal
Non-reflective	Reflective
Individual Approach	Collaborative Approach

CONTEXT

UK HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

PERSONAL CONTEXT



ACADEMIC CONTEXT



Academics working in the UK HE Sector are:

- facing an **existential crisis of authority, legitimacy, identity and purpose** (Behari-Leak, 2017)
 - pernicious anti-intellectualism directed towards academics emanating from media and political arenas (“people in this country have had enough of experts”, Gove, 2016) (Glasson, 2012; Coll, 2016; Motta, 2017);
- navigating a **world of uncertainty and complexity** (Barnett, 2000) in post 'Brexit' Britain;
- contending with the **burgeoning massification, marketisation and financialisation** of the HE sector
 - introduction of tuition fees, the formation of business partnerships, and the instalment of HE private providers (Scott, 1995; 2005; McGettigan, 2014);
- working in Universities driven by **New Public Management (NPM) policies and practices** (Boyask *et al.*, 2004)
 - corporate efficiency, entrepreneurialism, strong management, customer-focused (Hussey & Smith, 2010);
- being measured against **new accountability, auditing and performativity regimes** (Mäkitalo, 2012) that **privileges data-driven performance technologies** (Anderson, 2017)
 - Key Performance Indicators (KPI), Research Excellence Framework (REF), Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF), National Student Survey (NSS), etc;
- being **expert in other fields other than their specialised subject area**
 - employability, sustainability, entrepreneurship, new technologies, internationalisation, new pedagogies, etc.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



What are the conditions that enable or encumber professional learning of academics in higher education?

To what extent does an academic give precedence to one form of professional knowledge (e.g. subject discipline) over another (e.g. institutional policy)?

THEORY

ENTANGLING THE SOCIAL AND THE MATERIAL

SOCIOMATERIALITY (1/2)



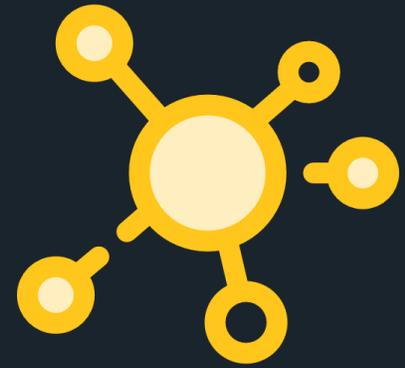
- An emerging world-view that reconceptualises the relationship between the social (i.e. language, ideas, desires, politics, practices) and the material (i.e. humans, animals, spaces, tools, data) (Orlikowski, 2007; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Fenwick *et al.*, 2011; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014);
- It rejects the concepts of discrete self-contained entities such as ‘learners’, ‘institutions’, ‘pencils’ and ‘computers’...
- ...instead accepts them as being inherently inseparable (or entangled), and as parts of everyday processes and practices, where “people and things only exist in relation to each other” (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008);
- Features of sociomateriality (Jones, 2014):
 - **Materiality:** situating materiality at the centre of our understanding phenomena related to contemporary organisations;
 - **Inseparability:** denotes the view that the social and material are not isolated phenomena, but inextricably intertwined or mutually interdependent;
 - **Relationality:** takes the position that relations are an essential aspect of any contemporary phenomenon;
 - **Performativity:** observing the relations and boundaries between the social and material are a situated performance and not a solely human capacity; and
 - **Practices:** understanding how these relations and boundaries act and interact within routine activities and practices, rather than discourses or cognition.

SOCIOMATERIALITY (2/2)



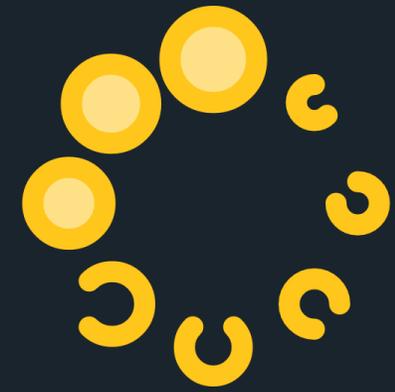
- **Sociomateriality** has many different theoretical and ontological positions:
 - **Entanglement:** the social and material are treated as comparable and inseparable agencies, where the social and the material mutually co-constitute each other (Barad, 2007; Orlikowski, 2007);
 - **Imbrication:** the social and material are regarded as interrelated agencies that are distinct elements of overlapping patterns, so that the elements function interdependently (Leonardi, 2011);
 - **Aspectuality:** the social and material worlds are regarded as offering two contrasting, yet intractable ways (or aspects) in which everything that comes into existence is experienced or expressed through its relational embodiments (Martine & Cooren, 2016; Wilhoit, 2018).

ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY (ANT)



- Developed in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s within the field of Science and Technology Studies;
- Provided scientists with a set of sociological tools to explain the nature of scientific knowledge and facts within the social and political domains in which they operated under;
- It is conceived as being part of a family of theories, a loose ‘toolkit’ or a “sensitivity to the materiality, relationality and uncertainty of practices” (Latour, 2005; Law & Singleton, 2013);
- A unique repertoire of concepts and vocabulary that are used in explorative and experimental ways to interrogate how ‘actors’ are attuned and “assembled in those practices”:
 - Actor, Network, Intermediary, Generalised Symmetry, Translation, Immutable Mobile, etc.;
- The process of ‘sociology of translation’ enables the network to be defined and controlled. ‘Actors’ are recruited and they negotiate and agree upon the outcome of the process. The ‘actors’ identities are established and attributed, power relations are recognised, and scenarios are delineated. Translators, or ‘spokespersons’, play a key role in this process. An ‘actor’ can be an individual or a collective unit (e.g. a department);
- Perhaps more controversially is the notion of ‘generalised symmetry’. This positions human and non-human ‘actors’ as being inseparable, with non-human actors having agency (Callon 1984; 1986).

NON-REPRESENTATIONAL THEORY (NRT)



- Emerged from the innovations of non-representational thought, performances and practices developed by the counterculture of the 1960s;
- It's interest lies in “the geography of what happens” – this offers a descriptive “bare bones” of a particular event, which places emphasis upon on “how space and time emerge through embodied practice” (Thrift, 1996; 2005; 2008);
- Provides a rich and eclectic set of resources to investigate the “more-than-human, more-than-textual, multi-sensual worlds” (Lorimer, 2005) that can be used to “unlock and animate new (human and nonhuman) potentialities” (Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000);
- It challenges researchers to view representation as a form of “presentation”, or something that is “more-than representational” (Lorimer, 2005).
- The seven tenets of NRT (Thrift, 2008):
 1. To “capture the ‘onflow’ ... of everyday life”;
 2. To be “resolutely anti-biographical and pre-individual”;
 3. To focus upon everyday practices, performances and actions;
 4. To recognise the agency of human / non-human actors;
 5. To be experimental;
 6. To stress the importance of affect and sensation; and
 7. To incorporate formations of space.

METHODOLOGY

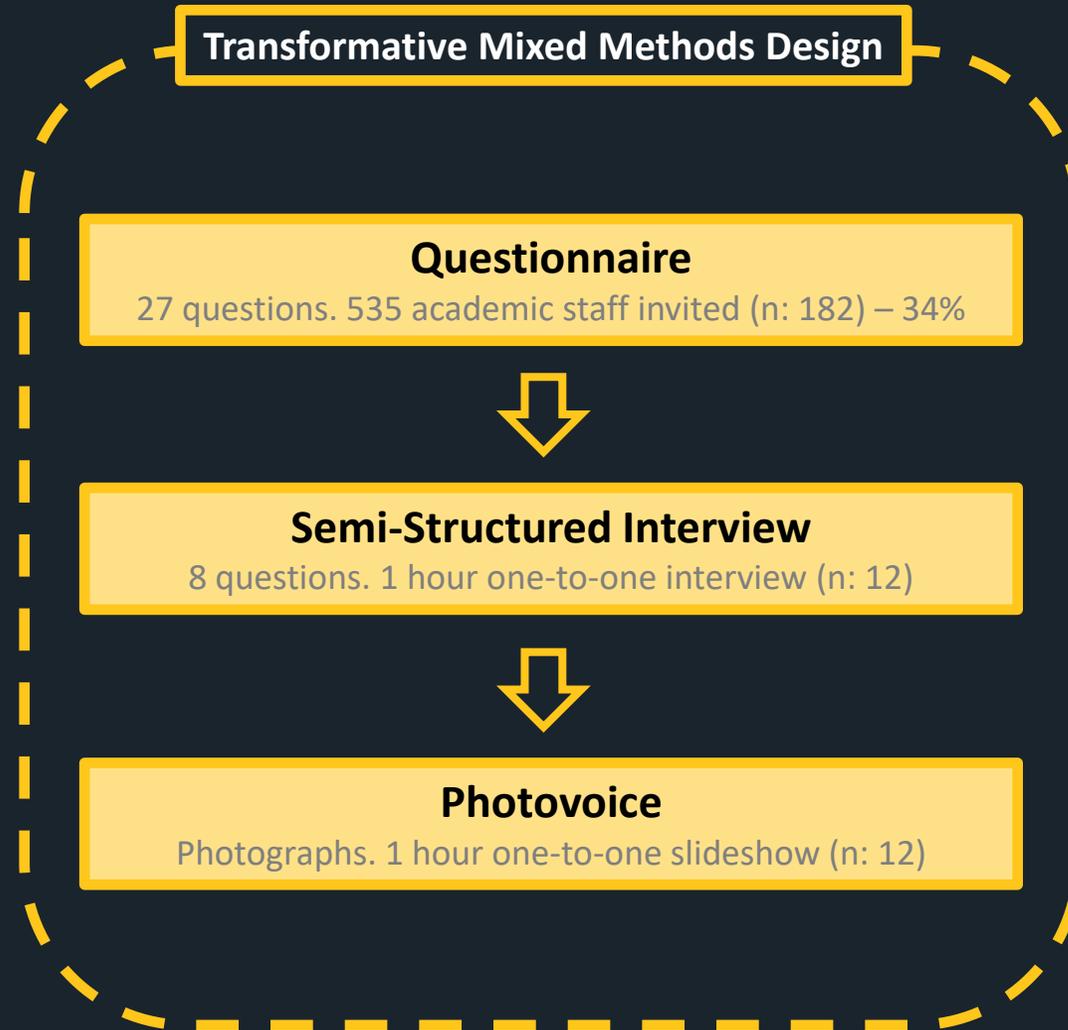
HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CARRIED OUT

INSIDER RESEARCH



- It concerns with conducting research around one's own local or indigenous community, such as one's profession, workplace, society or culture;
- Such research which brings a “contextual understanding” that outsiders lack;
- One particular challenge is that of “over-familiarity” with the community setting, research context and participants
 - Arguably, an insider researcher who is a part of a community can be considered as an outsider if they do not share that community's particular set of characteristics;
- There can be tangible benefits for organisations involved in a study as research findings may impact upon organisational policies and practices;
- It may not be possible to protect and preserve organisational and personal anonymity (Trowler, 2011; 2014):
 - usual approaches in providing anonymity may compromise data analysis and transparency;
 - may have “limited value” given that the researcher's identity, and therefore their place of work, are already known in the report / paper;
- Researchers should “work on the assumption that the site of their study cannot be anonymous” (Floyd & Arthur, 2012). Instead, every effort should be made to ensure the participants remain anonymous.

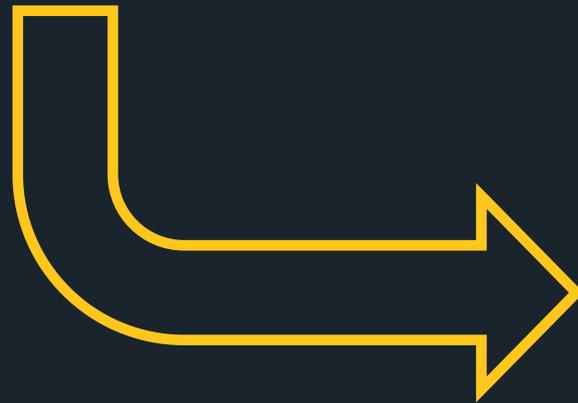
MIXED METHODS DESIGN



PARTICIPANT PROFILE



182
respondents



47
respondents



- Module Leader
- Permanent Contract
- Main University Campuses
- 1-20 years experience in HE

12
participants



PHOTOVOICE (1/3)



- **Underpinned and supported by three major theoretical frameworks** (Wang & Burris, 1994; 1997; Wang, 1999):
 - Paulo Freire's (1970) **Theory of Critical Consciousness**: empowering individuals to critically engage in dialogue and thinking about their community and circumstances;
 - Adherence to **Feminist Theory**: provide a 'voice' to those marginalised and vulnerable populations and takes into consideration male bias that has influenced participatory research; and
 - Notion of **Documentary Photography**: used as an attempt to provide visual expression to social conscience.
- This method has **three broad aims**:
 1. to encourage participants to **record and reflect** upon their concerns and experiences;
 2. to enable participants to **find their voice and a common cause with others** in the same situation, through sharing and group dialogue of their photographs; and
 3. to **reach out and educate powerful others** (e.g. policy makers) in better understanding the realities of the participants' situation (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).
- **The method was modified so that**:
 - participants became **co-researchers**, who were encouraged to **record and reflect** upon their concerns and experiences;
 - adopted an **individualised approach** to ensure the **anonymity** of the participants was preserved, but they shared the same **common cause with others** in the same situation;
 - it was **not feasible** to involve **policy makers** into this research project.

PHOTOVOICE (2/3)



- Each participant (now co-researcher) were given a **15-30 minute briefing session**:
 - This covered what was and was not in scope (i.e. things and spaces that enabled and/or prohibited their professional learning) ;
 - A **briefing paper** was provided;
 - Discussion around **ethical considerations** (i.e. no pictures of people's faces, or photographs of prohibited spaces);
 - Provided with a **USB stick** to store photographs and slideshow.
- The participants used their own cameras and camera phones to take pictures.
- The participants were given **three weeks** in which to take their photographs and create their slideshow.
- The participant chose which pictures they were going to use and constructed the order in which these photographs were presented.
 - Microsoft PowerPoint was used to create the slideshow.
- The creativity and a sense of agency the participants gained from taking the photographs contributed towards a sense of **empowerment and developing a voice** concerning their professional learning:
 - Some found the process therapeutic, whilst others found a "safe space for expression".

PHOTOVOICE (3/3)



- The photovoice exercise presented **some challenges** for both me and the participants:
 - **photographing people:** photograph something that relates to the context in which a person is important to the participant;
 - **missed photograph opportunities:** don't exclude these, just note that these were not present at the time of the slideshow;
 - **time commitment:** in reality, the turnaround time ranged from 4 to 14 weeks.
- However, the issues reported in the photovoice literature relating to supplying a camera and training the participant to take pictures did not materialise.
 - Older studies note that cost of camera (and film) along with training **could make the project expensive.**
- **Developing a non-representational style of photography** (Boyd, 2017):
 - Capturing fast movements with a moderate exposure. It leaves a trace, emphasising the **temporal (duration)** quality of the photograph;
 - Using **photomontage (narration)**. By breaking up images and using odd placements of fragmented photographs, these can be used to disrupt our perception of the normal world;
 - The production of short segments of video using **stop-frame animation (movement)**; and
 - **Capture close ups on objects and things, not people or their faces.**

FINDINGS

WHAT THE RESEARCH UNCOVERED

THE RESULTS (1/2)

From the survey (n:182), the following “top ten” barriers to engaging with professional learning were identified:



1. Lack of time (69%)
2. Lack of time to follow up afterwards (59%)
3. Getting release time to attend the event (38%)
4. Too expensive (28%)
5. Commitments to family members (28%)
6. Lack of relevance (24%)
7. Lack of incentives (23%)
8. Travel to another site / campus (21%)
9. Lack of encouragement from department (19%)
10. Completely unaware of the event (19%)

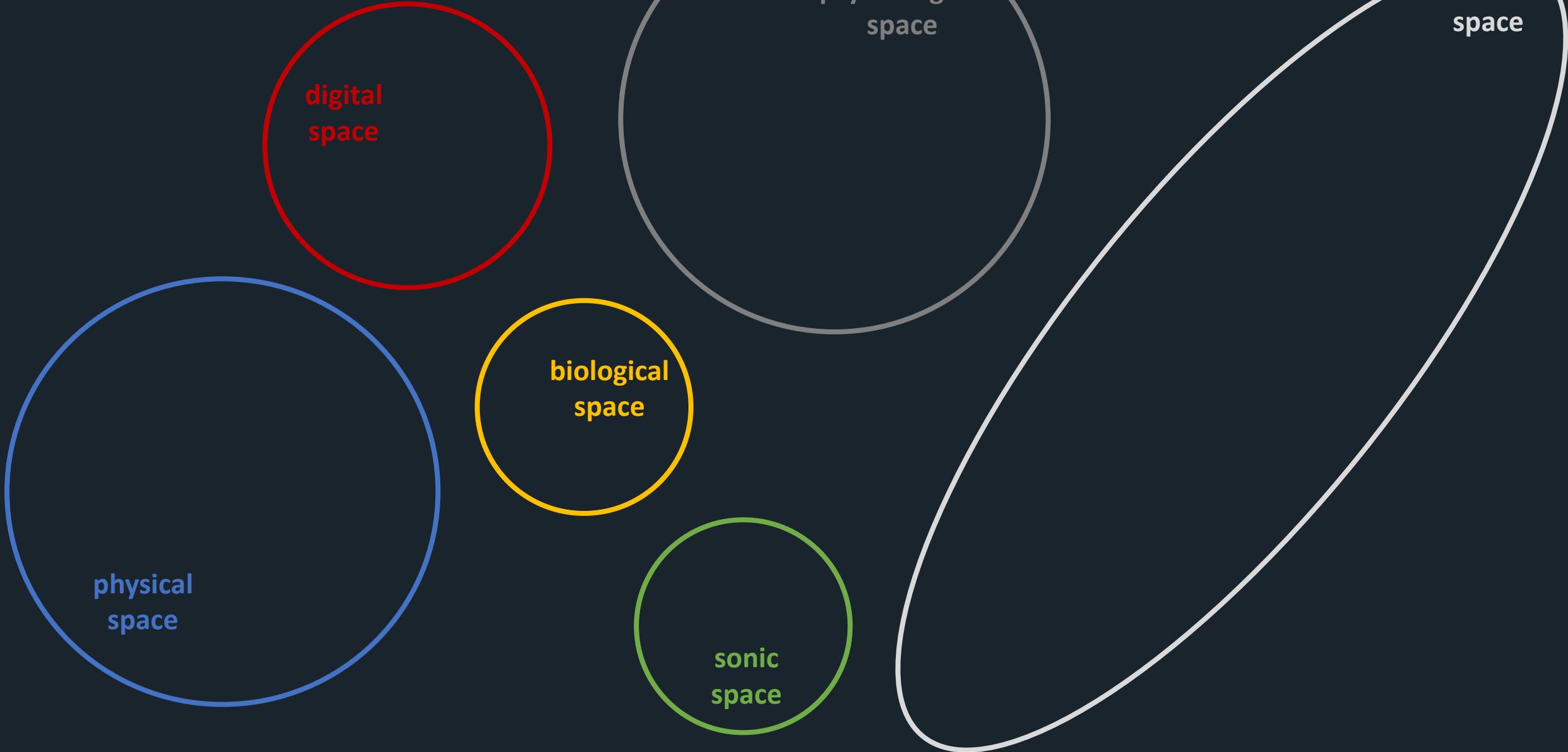
THE RESULTS (2/2)

Other **issues** arose from interviews (n:12) and photovoice (n:12):

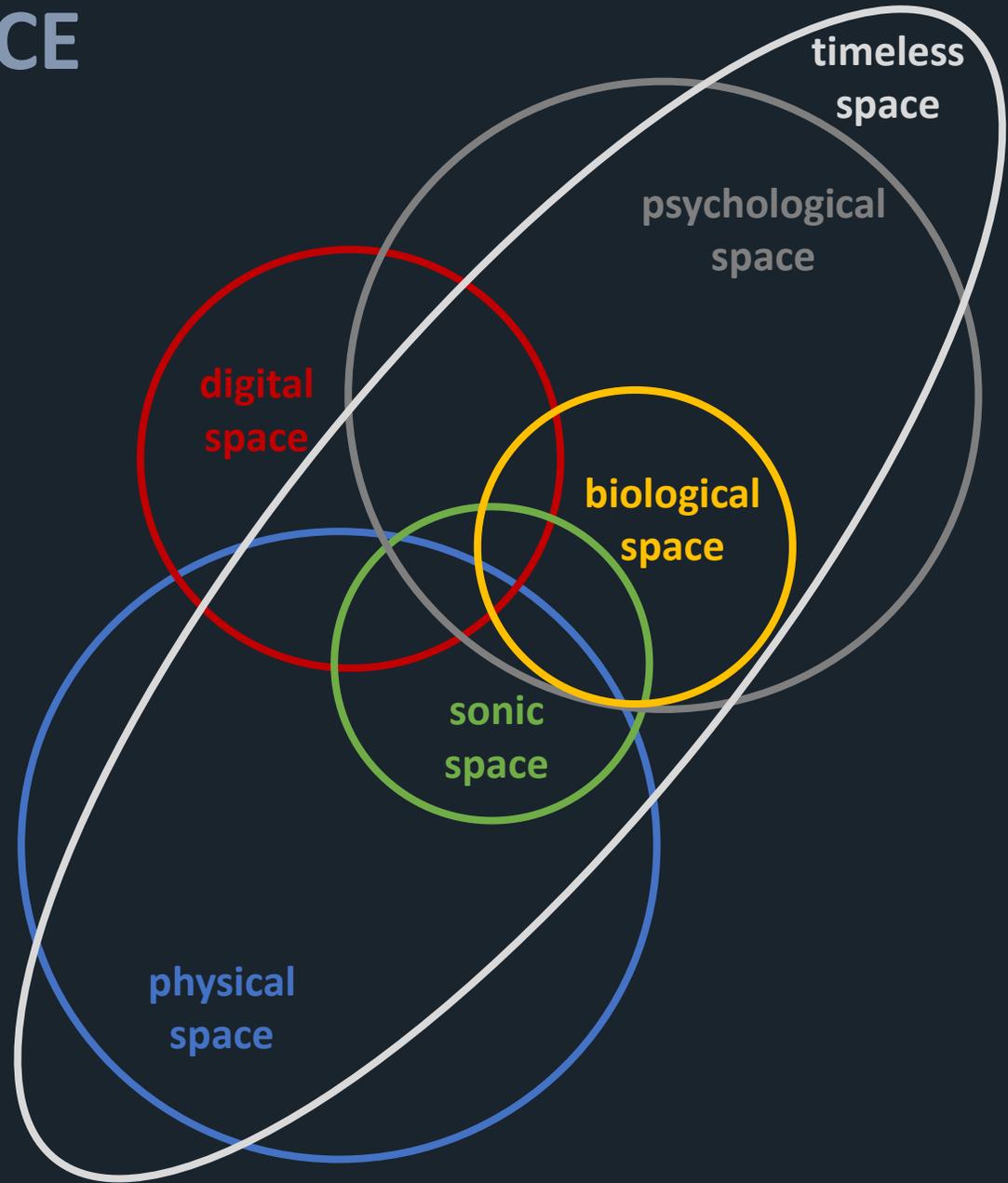
- Learning and work are **intricately inter-related** – treated as co-emergent;
- Having to learn “stuff” that often sits **outside of an academic’s area of expertise** (e.g. sustainability) and having to maintain “**authenticity**”;
- Knowing **where to find this “stuff”, or even who to go to find out more about this “stuff”**:
 - The role of the *knowledgeable other* (could be a person or an object)
- Information that is **not consistent, not right, and/or keeps changing**;
- Attempts to “**escape**” or “**hide**” from *institutional noise* (both physical and digital interruptions) – tiny acts of resistance, promoting self-care;
- Finding a suitable **space to learn**:
 - Occupation of a *transient workspace* (e.g. cafe);
 - Construction of a *surrogate workspace* (e.g. spare room);
 - The automobile was identified as an **important learning space**.
- The same object and/or space could be **both an enabler and an encumbrance** to professional learning (e.g. smartphone, e-mail).



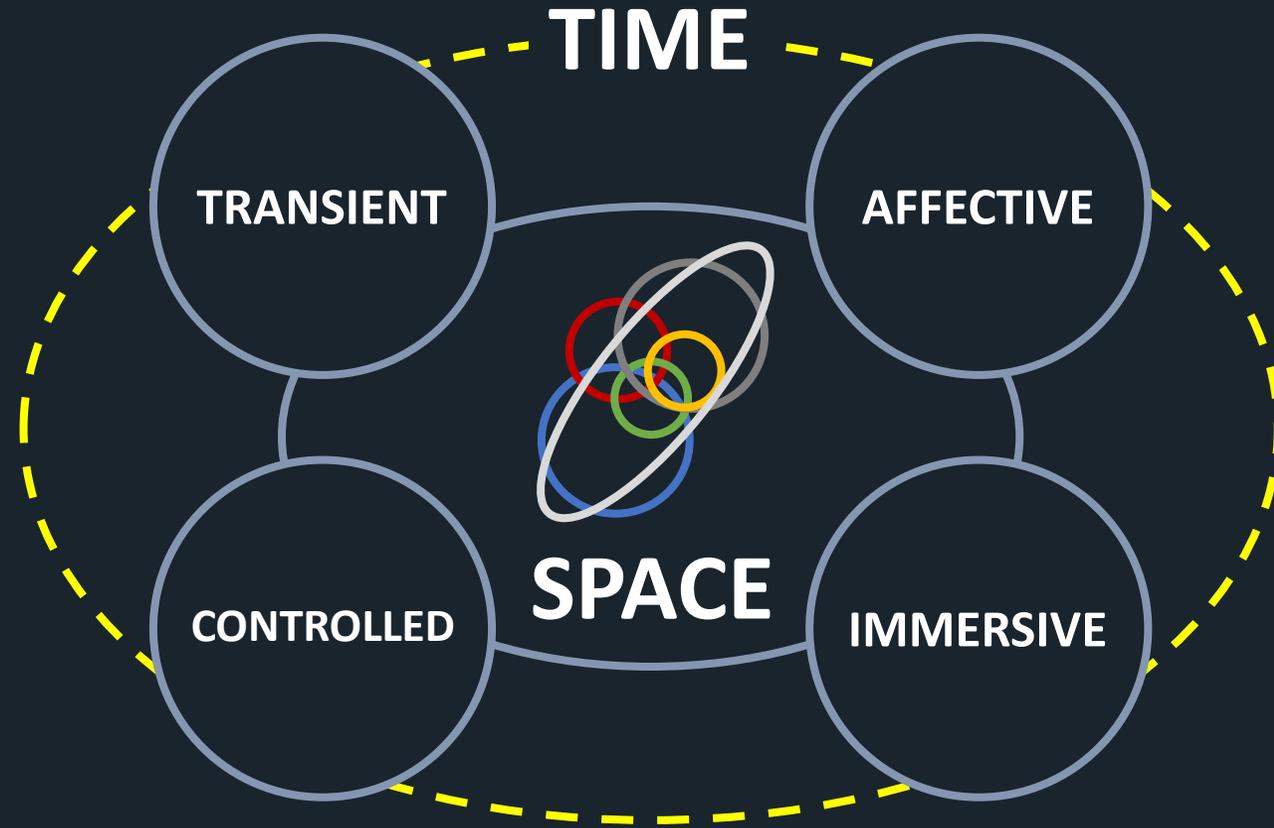
TYPES OF SPACE



COALESCENT SPACE



SPATIAL PROPERTIES



DISCUSSION

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

ANXIETY MACHINES (1/2)

The managerial colonisation of HEIs and the *institutional noise* that it generates can alienate academic staff from the fruits of their academic labour.



Universities have become what Hall (2014) describes as “**anxiety machines**”, which takes on a ‘survival of the fittest’ mentality in a global HE market, whereby **anxiety** is “not an unintended consequence or malfunction, but is **inherent in the design of a system** driven by improving productivity and the potential for the accumulation of capital” (Hall & Bowles, 2016, p. 33).

The university find its own existence under threat from the precariousness of student fees, student numbers, immigration controls, reputation, league tables, and funding opportunities. The anxiety experienced by the institution is transmitted on to staff and students. **Like a virus, anxiety has an infecting influence that replicates itself, spreading voraciously and indiscriminately.**

ANXIETY MACHINES (2/2)



The university as an “anxiety machine” starts to manifest itself through a multitude of historical and contemporary trajectories, including (but not limited to):

- the various UK HE reforms (e.g. Robbins Report, Dearing Report, HERA);
- the massification and marketisation of the HE sector (e.g. tuition fees, HE private providers);
- the inclusion of new accountability, auditing and performativity regimes (e.g. REF, TEF, KEF) – very data driven;
- an international commitment to the lifelong learning project in promoting knowledge-based economies;
- the expansion of pervasive digital and mobile technologies and the growth of 'Big Data';
- "Brexit"– effecting international student recruitment and research collaborations (and funding) between other EU universities; and
- the Global Economic Crisis during the late 2000s and early 2010s and the UK Government's response through a programme of austerity policies.

CONCLUSIONS

HOW THE RESEARCH INFORMS PRACTICE

THE IMPLICATIONS

These spatial properties will have implications on how, where and when academics go about engaging in their professional learning and development activities.

Policy Makers

- Consider creating quiet (and possibly private) workspaces.
- Ensure learning and development time is created and protected.
- Understand that many of the objectives of professional development concern changes and outcomes that are not easily measured in the traditional sense and that the measurements currently sought are often not those that have the greatest impact on university performance.

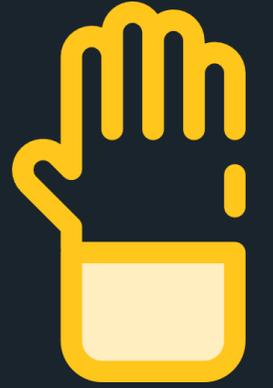
Academic & Organisational Development Teams

- Carry out a professional development needs analysis to provide more tailored and targeted professional development for academic staff – recognising disciplinary differences.
- Recognise the value of informal and tacit professional learning as well as learning-on-the-job and design greater opportunities for such forms of activities.
- Facilitate the engagement of academics with professional development sessions through more flexible availability of opportunities (e.g. micro-learning, flipped professional learning).

Academics

- Engage in a time management course.
- Develop a professional learning network (PLN) that taps into a variety of spaces, tools and people.
- Take a reflective approach to documenting your engagement in professional learning and take note of the impact and outcomes of this engagement.

THANKS FOR LISTENING!



QUESTIONS?

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SOME CREDITS



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