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From 'no space' to 'scholarly space': a reflection on the place of scholarship in the third space

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Abstract

This opinion piece utilises our own scholarship journeys and collaborative work as an example to inspire others in the third space to join our commitment to share experiences, values, and theoretical underpinnings of our work beyond the confines of our immediate contexts. Through reflecting on these personal journeys, we present scholarship as a vehicle that can enable those working across boundaries in higher education to contribute to the theoretical and epistemological foundations of their praxis. We argue that a critical contributor to this effect is the increased visibility within our own and surrounding professions. This becomes possible through a wide-ranging concept of scholarship, encompassing outputs from those that are more informal and practice-oriented, through to more traditional, theory-driven accounts. Rather than focusing on the constraints of the third space, we encourage those operating in this liminal space — such as ourselves as learning developers — to take advantage of the possibilities it can afford them. Our scholarship has enhanced our understanding of Learning Development work as theory-informed praxis, an outcome that we hope can be motivational towards the scholarship of other third-space professions.

Keywords: third space; scholarship; learning development; higher education; community of practice.

Introduction

This opinion piece explores scholarship as a vehicle to increase the visibility of professionals inhabiting the third space. We believe that engagement with scholarship can militate against the danger of the third space becoming 'no space' (Hall, 2022, p.26), if it continues to be an inward-looking, hidden, and misunderstood space in higher education (HE). This piece utilises Learning Development (LD) as an example of a third-space profession and refers to our trajectories to demonstrate that creating spaces for scholarship is possible. Our trajectories and collaboration have not only enhanced our visibility, but also allowed us to play a growing role in contributing to knowledge about the theoretical underpinnings of our professional field (Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2024), and advocating for others to follow suit (Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2024). We therefore finish with a call to action to encourage more third-space professionals to join our commitment to disseminate cross-boundary theoretical underpinnings, epistemological positionings, practices, and experiences as HE blended practitioners. We argue that, even when faced with apparent institutional constraints, such action remains both possible and important to practising in the third space.

Scholarship in the third space

Third-space roles are identified as those that tend to perform one of the three traditional HE functions: teaching, research, and service (Macfarlane, 2011). These specialists operate across the professional and academic continuum and are often referred to as 'blended' (Whitchurch, 2013) or 'integrated' practitioners (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). Learning developers, as one such professional group, are concerned with the development of students' academic literacies, hence their role focuses strongly on pedagogical activities (Webster, 2022). This praxis-oriented focus can limit opportunities and scope for scholarly engagement (Bickle et al., 2021; Syska and Buckley, 2022).

However, many learning developers identify scholarship as intrinsic to their professional identity, which they deliberately choose to enact, despite their lack of contractual requirements to publish (Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2024). LD scholarship is predictably praxis orientated and education focused, a type of research often valued less highly than discipline-specific outputs, which attract funding and demonstrate significant impact

(Hulme, 2022). Thus, the conditions in which learning developers operate are seldom conducive to developing institutional networks that enable LD research, which is why learning developers often seek such opportunities externally (Bickle et al., 2021).

We would argue, nevertheless, that this lack of expectation to publish could offer learning developers and third-space colleagues more freedom to write, which others under managed research conditions cannot afford. We have hence facilitated the creation of an LD scholarship manifesto (Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2024) in response to the continuing need to set the epistemological foundations for this field through writing about it (Syska and Buckley, 2022). This opinion piece builds on our mission to contribute to developing LDs' knowledge base and creating a coherent, collective memory and professional identity. Together, these foundations offer this profession greater visibility and institutional understanding, beyond the student populations we work alongside and the colleagues who already navigate third spaces.

LD scholarship — the story so far

The argument that learning developers should produce scholarship is not new. Verity and Trowler (2011, p.247) cautioned against the field continuing its inward-looking tendencies, as doing so tended to 'mute self-criticism' and maintain discrepancies in understandings about LD work. Samuels (2013) argued that outwards visibility and recognisability would be increased by LD practitioners developing a coherent theoretical base. The undoubted progress in the intervening decade has not dampened the calls for the volume and reach of LD scholarship to increase. Syska and Buckley's (2022) position that the LD field still requires a 'consistent body of knowledge' (p.4) to be 'satisfactorily written into existence' (p.2) resonates strongly as a rallying cry. Building thereupon, we have argued that learning developers must 'engage with the pedagogical and theoretical underpinnings of their work [...] to articulate and disseminate LD's values and principles' (Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2024, p.22). The edited collection *How to be a Learning Developer in Higher Education* (Syska and Buckley, 2024a) is peppered with imperatives to the field to increase its scholarship, be that around consolidating the theoretical base (Arthur, 2024; Asher, 2024; Dhillon, 2024; Slawson and Eyre, 2024) or the practicalities of getting ourselves heard (Fallin, 2024; Syska and Buckley, 2024b).

Establishing why progress in LD scholarship has been slower than desired becomes the catalyst for progression. For our chapter, we surveyed 30 learning developers, asking for their feedback on various proposed statements for an LD scholarship manifesto (Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2024). Notably, some practitioners struggled to align with the critical aspects of LD theory. Their reasons suggested that institutional and personal constraints militated against it:

> 'LDs' power to challenge HE norms and innovate may be limited [...] assuming that we have that power seems unrealistic' [R7].

> 'I don't participate in scholarship of my own area much because I feel like the emails I receive are overly academic, theoretical, and not very practical. It doesn't match with my day-to-day experience in LD' [R14].

> 'I think the statements are aims, rather than what is practiced [*sic.*] and embodied [...]. [LD] spans both professional and academic, with an additional burden of navigating two realms, making it difficult to engage with LD scholarship as we hope to' [R18].

Inherent in these points is a belief that our LD scholarship manifesto was aspirational yet disjointed from some practitioners' everyday experiences. While this position could signal that the aspirations are lofty, it might equally indicate the respondents' inability or reticence to cross boundaries due to institutional constraints or imposter syndrome. It is likely that this situation is a microcosm of that felt by third-space practitioners more widely. This said, the consequence of inaction may damage third-space professions' standing (Hall, 2022), as Malkin and Chanock (2018) warned about in the Academic Language and Literacy field in Australia. We therefore argue that learning developers should not passively accept the constraints of the third space, as doing so risks invisibility. Instead, we must focus on how we can harness its boundary-crossing potential to increase visibility (Whitchurch, 2008). The collaboration between the two authors over the past years exemplifies the possibilities.

Our scholarship story

Our scholarship journey in tandem began, arguably, due to lack of mentors, institution-based role models, and networks sufficiently invested in LD as a research field. The need to meet like-minded professionals interested in LD scholarship was exacerbated over the pandemic, which made our niche roles even more siloed. We met as founding members of

the ALDinHE virtual community of practice (CoP), dedicated to LD scholarship. This community gathered colleagues from across UK-based institutions with a shared commitment to write about LD and led to several collaboratively produced scholarly outputs (Bickle et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2022; Welton et al., 2023). Alongside these whole-group publications, other collaborative endeavours emerged organically from shared research interests and views. Being within this community helped overcome initial hurdles, allowed us to deal with potential imposter syndrome, and gave us confidence to write through the very act of getting our ideas out there.

Coincidentally, we were both undertaking doctoral research into the LD field. Whilst we do not view PhDs as the only route into scholarly practice, our parallel journeys led to similar interests and a certain camaraderie. Like other third-space professionals, we have also understood the value of fostering opportunities for scholarship beyond our immediate practice and institutions (Whitchurch, 2019), including the establishment of CoPs (Veles and Carter, 2016; Green et al., 2020; Lucas et al., 2021). Without these networks, we would have had the ambition to write but would have struggled to scaffold our scholarship journeys. Having these networks gave us a purpose — projects to work on — and, most importantly, a sense of belonging.

Since the CoP's inception, we have continued to commit to growing LDs' scholarship. Therefore, we have attempted, together with the LD community, to delineate key LD scholarly principles and a working definition of LD scholarship that encompasses a diverse understanding of outputs beyond traditional publications. LD scholarship can take many forms, on which our thoughts dwell less than on how 'an ongoing form of academic conversation […] [as a] vehicle which allows those invested in LD to have continual community discussions' (Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2024, p.158) can continually flourish within the third space. We believe that keeping these conversations alive will generate enough noise to encourage colleagues in more traditional academic roles to join in. Drawing others into the conversations LD is concerned with, primarily around student education, can make our work more visible and ultimately improve the experiences of those we are concerned with the most: students.

Rethinking scholarship for the third space

In a bid to inspire others, we would like to encourage the reframing of what can constitute scholarship in the minds of early-career LD practitioners or those without previous scholarly outputs. We have been upfront that doctoral projects were a significant launchpad into our scholarship journeys. However, there have been lessons learned along the way that merit the label of 'things we wish we had known earlier'. Notably, we believe that we can dispel erstwhile notions that 'worthy' research and scholarship only involves theory building. Changing this mindset can open doors for learning developers and parallel third-space professions.

There is rich potential to publish on even the most seemingly humble, day-to-day pedagogic intervention — as we are devoting efforts to the intervention regardless, why not use our time twice to disseminate ideas? For example, an initially minor interest for one of us — the use of playfulness in LD — was turned into applying a playful disposition towards organising the ALDinHE 2023 Conference and a guest editorial explaining that process (Johnson and Barclay, 2023). One of the authors then attended a Playful Learning conference, at which ideas and collaboration inspired the creation of a board game to teach academic integrity to undergraduates. The game was presented in workshops at the 2024 versions of both conferences. There is also agreement at the host institution that the game's creators can complete a research project with students on its effects on learning. What began as the spark of an idea is therefore now being disseminated as a part of the LD scholarship canon. Interestingly, the third-space status of the creators' roles has not hindered this trajectory. This example also suggests an apparent resolution to the LD practitioners' objections, discussed above, that scholarship can seem dislocated from practice. It is also perhaps instructive to others that they need only to locate a small niche in which to add to scholarship and become 'known for knowing about'.

For any learning developer considering initial steps into publication or reviving a scholarly career, Syska and Buckley (2024b) invaluably highlight the multitudinous opportunities available to get the word out. Meanwhile, recent trends in this journal have included edited collections on innovative practice during the pandemic and the option for article types such as opinion pieces and case studies as well as traditional papers. An abundant space is therefore highlighted to publish about LD, be that a practice-based example or the necessary theory-development work to develop the theoretical base.

Conclusion

The third space *can* feel constraining, and perhaps *is* constraining in as much as its contractual duties rarely promote scholarly development. However, we conclude that these constraints can be transcended with perseverance. Whitchurch (2013) emphasises how third-space practitioners can move through professional categories of *bounded, cross-boundary, unbounded*, and *blended.* Among the legitimacies of blended professionals, Whitchurch (2013, p.11) identifies 'acquisition of academic credentials' and 'ability to achieve credibility in the academic space'. *Credibility* in this sense appears to go together with *visibility* in our sense. Our own journeys typify crossing boundaries to create external networks, using those to inspire scholarly outputs, and consequently increasing visibility both within and outside our institutions. Only with this visibility can LD move beyond the cycles of self-justification that have often plagued the profession. Less time spent thereupon means more focus on what matters to us, and the epistemological and theoretical underpinning of our work. We would encourage more blended professionals to join us on this quest, and to draw from ideas in this article towards making it a reality.

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