Leadership in the Third Space – What Super-Powers Help Third Space Leaders Thrive?

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In higher education, the third space can be defined as a place where blended professional and academic roles and skills overlap to achieve common goals which primarily focus on student outcomes. This liminal space can be challenging to lead in as third space areas are typically complex, with a great need for problem-solving and resourcefulness. Career pathways for third space leaders do not follow a straightforward or linear trajectory and fit-for-purpose training and education opportunities for these roles are scarce. Examples of third space environments are educational design, learning design, learning technology and quality assurance. This paper explores common leadership traits and super-powers (key strengths or unique skills), which could contribute to a model for effective leadership in the third space.

Keywords: third space, leadership, blended professionals, educational design, learning design, educational technologist, super-power.

Introduction and context

In higher education, the third space is defined as a place between professional and academic domains, where administrative service has become reoriented towards one of partnership with academic colleagues. This has led to the emergence of "increasingly mixed identities" (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 378). Third space roles are typically focussed on enhancing student learning and there has been significant growth in this space in recent decades as universities expand and adapt to government policy shifts which have become increasingly focussed on student progression and the outcomes of traditionally underrepresented student cohorts (Bamford et al., 2022). Third space professionals are described by Stoltenkamp (2016) as blended professionals, operating within a support environment, of the "emerging domain between academic and professional spheres" and which "constitute an important link between these two spheres" (Stoltenkamp, 2016).

The authors of this paper currently work in a diverse mix of third space roles in public universities across Australia and New Zealand. The group originally came together to explore leadership as women in professional roles in higher education and quickly discovered common challenges associated with leading in the third space, due to it being a place where boundaries between academic and professional spheres are becoming increasingly permeable (Bamford et al., 2022), and where leaders face unique challenges not experienced in the more defined careers of their academic or professional peers. Building upon earlier investigations, and still a work in progress, this paper seeks to span both professional and academic perspectives and explore what attributes enable effective third space leadership.

Background

It is common for leaders working in the third space to experience a changing occupational identity (Veles et al., 2023). Due to the complex nature of the work they do – working in spaces which transcend the usual

boundaries – they are being excluded from the norm (Caldwell, 2024), which can lead to an uncertainty of their professional self (Obexer, 2022). Their hybrid role, which straddles academic and professional service in these liminal spaces is manifested though doing, not by being or becoming (Loftus, 2018; Quinsee, 2022; Veles et al., 2023). This can lead to feelings of being an imposter and having no place in the traditional institution, a lack of career trajectory (Obexer, 2022) and invisibility (Bickle et al., 2021). Third space roles often go unseen in organisational structures due to the binary nature of traditional university staffing, where roles are either "purely administrative or purely academic" (Bamford et al., 2022). This can place third space leaders in somewhat of a no-mans-land when seeking to articulate their value, develop their leadership skills and progress their career.

Whitchurch's reference to mixed identities (2008) strikes at the heart of the identity challenge of the third space leader. As third space leaders ourselves, we have arrived in our roles by different paths, and we bring a diverse range of skills and personal attributes, formal qualifications, teaching experience, technical skills and experience, growth mindsets, resilience, flexibility, creativity and no fear of change. As third space roles are rarely articulated as such in position descriptions or organisational structures, their hiddenness can pose a significant challenge for those seeking to articulate their identity as a third space leader, and their unspoken pedagogical value can often leave them feeling like they have no authority in their role (Whitchurch, 2008). This is particularly stark for staff from professional backgrounds crossing into an academic space. To gain a sense of authority, third space leaders of this nature often find they must build academic credibility and demonstrate their value to academic colleagues, in order to be let in or be taken seriously. This can sometimes playout like an "unspoken contract" (Whitchurch, 2008) where the blended professional must become a useful problem solver to gain the trust and buy-in of academic stakeholders.

Literature review of leadership theories

Third space leadership roles have become largely occupied by women (Denny, 2021). Leadership roles held by women are often roles with a high risk of failure and less organisational identification (Ryan et al., 2007). This can lead to increased stress, increased turnover and because they experience a lack of acknowledgement, this can lead to less commitment (ibid). They can also be exposed to gender bias, stereotypes and prejudice (Al Naqbi, 2023) and so they are often not included in informal networks which can provide emotional support and vital information with which to do their jobs effectively (Ryan et al., 2007). Despite being under-represented in leadership positions, those they do occupy have a far-reaching influence (Bone et al., 2024) and require a range of leadership skills which are highly valued. Foremost of which is emotional intelligence.

No matter the gender, studies have recognised emotional intelligence as a highly relevant and important requirement for academic leadership in higher education (Parrish, 2015) underpinning both personal and inter-personal contexts (Scott et al., 2008). Empathy is especially important (Parrish, 2013) in understanding and appreciating how others can be inspired to perform and achieve and in managing oneself as a leader. Servant leadership (Smith, 2005) places value on the attributes of listening, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, and a commitment to the growth of people and building community. Al Naqbi (2023) refers to relationship building, resilience, adaptability, creativity and innovation. Loftus (2018) discusses leadership attributes required in the third space as many and varied: "standing in seas of change" their advice is to set an intention, monitor progress but embrace paradox and uncertainty, and be kind to yourself. Evans (2000) suggests that authenticity in leadership comes from consistency, savviness (practical competence, craft knowledge), intuition and courage. Kouzes and Posner (2007) suggest inspiring a shared vision, modelling the way, enabling others to act and encouraging the heart. Jones et al., (2012) places emphasis on collective collaboration rather than individual power and control in all leadership dimensions – context, culture, change, relationships and activities. All these approaches appear to be applicable to leadership in the third space where collaboration and deeper partnership approaches meet the goal of improving learning and teaching in higher education (particularly with learning technologies), through meaningful collaboration and trust (Bamford 2022; Tay et al., 2023). These approaches differ from the traditional leadership models prevalent in

tertiary institutional structures, which can lead to the above-mentioned feelings of invisibility as a third space leader.

Invisibility can be challenging and powerful, engendering the chameleon-like ability to blend in or stand out depending on what the situation requires. This has been explored in leadership models by Bawa and Watson (2017) with the creation of the CHAMELEON characteristics acronym: Communication, Humility, Adaptability, Mentorship, Empathy, Looping, Engagement, Oscillation, Networking. Thornley and Schwenger (2023) considered this model and add further by exploring the value of situational relational leadership, active listening, having a flexible mindset, emotional intelligence, conflict management, understanding and managing both your own and others' emotions.

Methodology

The process of co-designing a model for leading in the third space, involves a mixed methods study that is partly autoethnographic, and partly data collection, combined with a literature review, and while unsystematic, it is targeted. Initially the authors explored individual skills through a SWOT analysis, and then collated the results to identify collective strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of third space professional staff leading teams. The key findings from the literature review conducted into leadership models and theories, resonated with the key themes identified in the SWOT analysis. This was used to propose a new model of leadership relevant for the third space in Australasian universities, through the lens of the 2023 ASCILITE conference themes of Partnerships, Diversity in People and Digital Pedagogy.

Third space workers in Australasian universities, viewing our poster at the ASCILITE 2023 Conference, were invited to anonymously contribute to our model by voluntarily responding to two Mentimeter activities, mapping their role in the third space landscape and reflecting on their role and leadership strength ("super-power").

The results from the small sample indicated that the majority are working in educational design and learning design, the middle range in the third space landscape.

Building upon this earlier work, in mid-2024, we invited the wider ASCILITE community to further contribute anonymous perspectives via a short answer voluntary survey attached to our blog post published on the TELall blog website and linked from the ASCILITE email newsletter. The short survey included a combination of closed and open questions designed to gather inputs relevant to refining our model, focusing on the skills and traits required for working in the third space, as well as what individuals self-identified as their super-power (their key strength or unique skill used to navigate the challenges and complexities of their role) that impacts their leadership in the third space.

The data were downloaded from Mentimeter (the platform used to interact with the poster), and from Microsoft Forms (the platform used for the short survey), and the keywords in the responses extracted. The responses are summarised in three columns in Table 1: Identified third space role areas; Required skills and traits for working in the third space; Identified superpowers for leading the third space.

This is a work in progress yet the preliminary results of our study, offer nuanced insights into leading and leadership within the third space.

Preliminary results and findings so far

Table 1
Roles, skills and superpowers of third space employees responding to poster interactivities and short survey included in ASCILITE TELall blog post.

Identified third space role areas	Required skills and traits for working in the third space	Identified superpowers for leading in the third space
Educational management; curriculum design; quality assurance; educational design; learning design; project coordinator; e-learning officer; educational technologist; edtech manager	Listening; empathy; risk taking; positivity; curiosity; technology-use analysis; providing strategic vision; demonstrating software; collaboration; problem solving; providing engaging content and learning activities for students; tech enthusiast; flexibility; fostering a sense of trust and open communication; data analysis and reporting	Empathy and flexibility; networking and connecting; listening carefully; caring for student learning and colleagues teaching; respecting and relating to others no matter the diversity; humbleness; having patience and realistic goals; continuous creativity and learning; self-reflection of successful and unsuccessful experiences; strategic, research informed, vision; information clarity

Many of the super-powers listed above relate to the literature: emotional intelligence being an important leadership trait linking to 'empathy', 'connecting', 'caring', and 'relating to others' (Parrish, 2015; Ryan et al., 2007); and the importance of building and maintaining relationships and partnerships through 'listening carefully', and 'respecting and relating' to diverse stakeholders. Other powers listed have strong connections to the servant leadership style (Smith, 2005) such as humbleness and patience, and the CHAMELEON (Bawa & Watson, 2017) characteristics of Humility ('humbleness'), Adaptability ('flexibility'), Empathy and Networking. There is also a parallel with Thornley and Schwenger's (2023) discussion with regard to a flexible mindset ('flexibility'), relational leadership ('relating to others') and understanding oneself ('self-reflection on successful and unsuccessful experiences').

The listed super-powers of 'research informed' and 'continuous creativity and learning' reflect a strong emphasis on learning in the role of the third space leader. This dovetails with findings from the literature which indicates that effective third space leaders educate others by partnering with and influencing academic and professional stakeholders and colleagues (Veles et al., 2023), and that to do this effectively we must build and deepen collegial and collaborative relationships and communities.

Conclusion and next steps

As the literature and our findings thus far indicate, the discovery and articulation of the third space is still in an exploratory phase and is thus a learning space in its own right. Whilst exploring our identity as third space practitioners, and in order to continue shaping our leadership model, we are recognising the leader's traits and the chameleon-like super-powers required to effectively navigate the rapidly changing third space terrain in the higher education sector.

With this true chameleon skin on, we navigate through the embracement, use and support of technology for teaching and learning, and the effective collaboration with our academic partners to achieve student success. This work in progress highlights the value of gathering inputs relevant for refining our complex and multidimensional emerging model. We are aware that a current limitation is the need to distinguish between leading and leadership. Both involve identity rather than roles. Future steps will include the further refinement, design, testing and feedback of the model.

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