

## **Eduhub: 27 January 2010 Professional Identities in Higher Education**

**Dr Celia Whitchurch**  
**Lecturer in Higher Education**  
**Institute of Education, University of  
London**  
**[c.whitchurch@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:c.whitchurch@ioe.ac.uk)**  
**[www.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.ioe.ac.uk)**



Centre for Higher  
Education Studies

## Background



- Research funded by UK Leadership Foundation for Higher Education 2005-2009
- 70+ interviews in UK, US, and Australia:
  - departmental/faculty administrators
  - specialist professionals (finance, HR)
  - teaching and learning support professionals in eg programme design and development; e-learning; multimedia; outreach/community partnership

2

## The problem of being 'in-between'



- Two faculties have amalgamated
- Multiple interest groups in both
- Learning technologists asked to develop a new website for merged faculty
- Expectations that website will help to create a unified faculty, but no clear brief...
- What are the implications for the roles of the learning technologists?

3

## The Literature...

- Increased specialisation of functions
- Increased 'professionalisation'
- Perceived 'division' between academic and professional staff/activities:
- Reflected in language:
  - 'Non-academic'
  - 'Support'
  - Concept of 'service' ('academic civil service')

4

## Findings

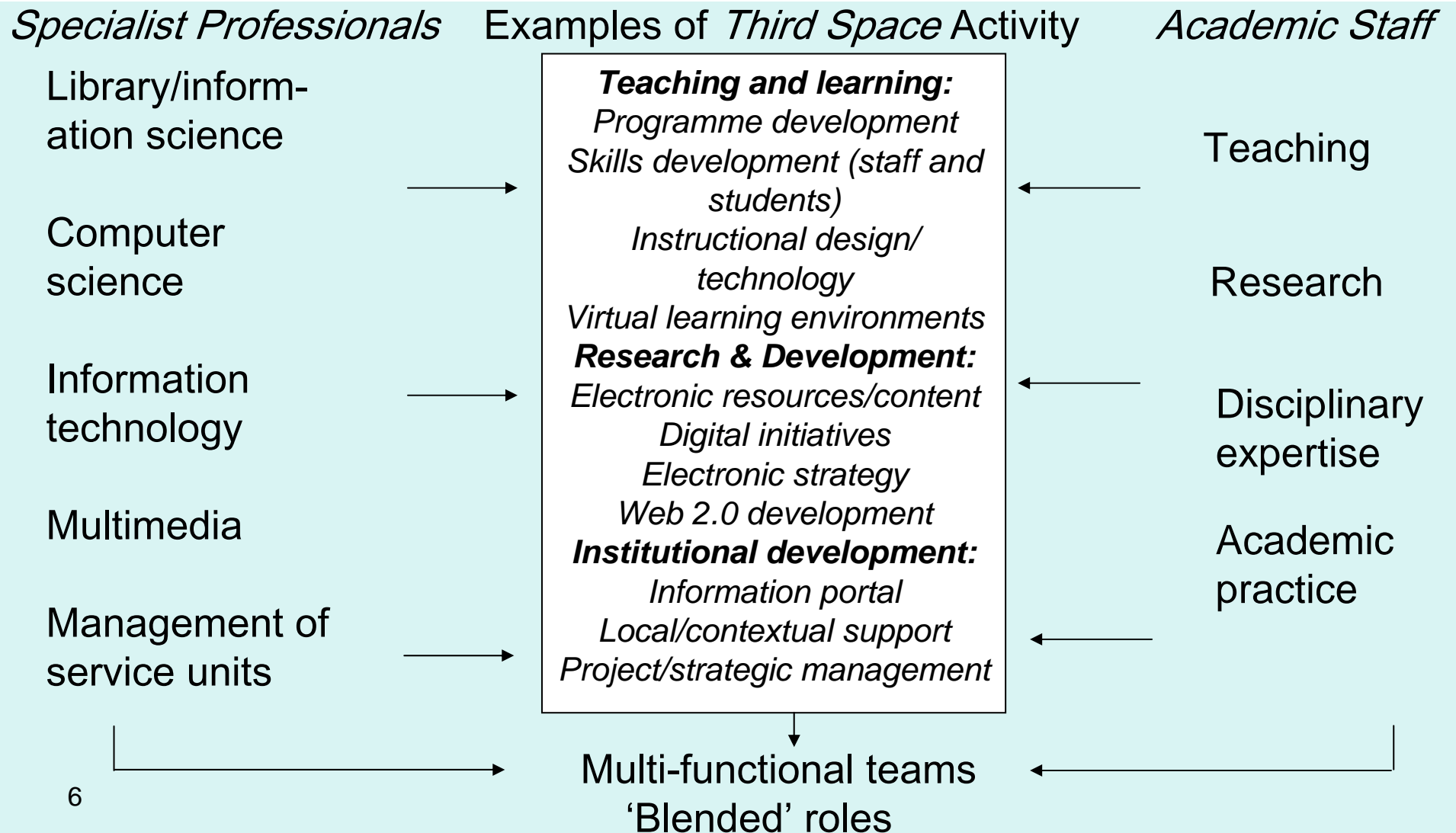
- A more diverse and mobile workforce
- Distributed management and leadership
- Emergence of multi-professional teams
- Concept of 'partnership'
- Blurring of boundaries
- Emergence of *Third Space* between professional and academic spheres of activity

5

# Third Space in relation to learning support professionals



Leading education and social research  
Institute of Education  
University of London



## Some *Third Space* characteristics of contemporary learning environments



<b>Diversification of activity</b>	Information provision, curriculum design/delivery, VLE development, multi-media, client services, skills transmission
<b>Cross-functionality</b>	Teaching and learning, research and development, project skills
<b>Multiple interfaces</b>	Staff and students, institutional administrators and directorate; library and information professionals; teaching and learning professionals; external users

7

## Some *Third Space* characteristics of learning support professionals...



- **Technical knowledge *plus***
  - Context-specific/local advice (“teaching moments”)
  - Ongoing ‘up-skilling’
  - Management/business competencies
  - Communication and inter-personal, ‘soft’ skills
  - Confidence to critique, challenge, validate academic colleagues

8


## Three processes at work in *Third Space*

- *Third space* = “A dynamic, in-between space” in which “cultural translation” takes place (Bhabha, 1990)
- Three processes at work:

English	Francais	Deutsch
‘Contestation’	Contestation	Anfechtung
‘Reconciliation’	Réconciliation	Versöhnung
‘Reconstruction’	Reconstruction	Neuerrichtung

9

## ‘Contestation’ process

- Identity influenced by existing structures (for instance, ‘civil service’ culture)
- Academic space seen as ‘default’ space
- Engagement with challenges and tensions
- Testing ground for new forms of activity
- Development of ‘coping strategies’ 
  - “secret managers” (Kehm, 2006)
  - “invisible workforce” (Rhoades, 2010)

10

## 'Reconciliation' process



- Collaboration with a view to perceived joint benefits/added value
- “Learning how to conceptualise contradiction” (Bhabha, 1990)
- Involves “a creative process of restructuring that draws selectively from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives” (Soja, 1996)
- A safer, more permissive space

11

## 'Reconstruction' process



- Coalescence of professional and academic space
- New forms of working around eg partnership, social capital building, networking:
  - “I have a good deal of freedom to produce solutions appropriate to the situation/project”
  - “Interaction with, and respect from, academic colleagues on an equal footing”
- Sense of ongoing investment in future

12

## Example: Media Specialist



- Degrees in electronic engineering/computer science; experience in industry; uncompleted PhD
- Worked between software developers and programme teams to:
  - Facilitate new methods of working
  - Promote best practice in design of learning materials
  - Offer technical training to staff

13

## Media Specialist: Contestation process



- “...you’ve got two different groups of people often talking two different languages”
- “... I’ve had to create my own role, find my own ways into systems and force my way into meetings, rather than wait for someone to ask me to contribute”

14

## Media Specialist: Reconciliation process



- “you don’t optimise the problem where it is, you try and optimise it within the system in which it occurs...”
- “It’s only when you combine multiple views of the same situation that you are able to understand the whole picture and identify those areas that are important.”

15

## Media Specialist: Reconstruction process



- “I see my role as ... trying to encourage people to build bridges rather than silos”
- “...if you get the relationships right everything else falls into place”
- “...you need to be able to give people the opportunities... to actually move into new areas... to move the thinking forward...”
- “There are a lot of ideas that never really deliver, and the question is... can you turn it into advice which helps in future decision making and thereby leads to discernable value?”

16

## Challenges of *Third Space*: For individuals I



- Working with conditions of ongoing change
  - Spatial ambiguity, disturbance, uncertainty
  - Ongoing transition over time
- Non-positional authority
  - “There’s no authority that you come with...”
  - “It’s what you are, not what you represent...”
  - “ If you solve a problem for us, we’ll come back and work with you again... ”

17

## Challenges of *Third Space*: For individuals II



- Status of boundary work
  - “you have a good deal of autonomy [that] allows you to go off into other areas ... and you can have some very enjoyable and meaningful relationships with colleagues... The negative side is that it is not acknowledged in any way” (Learning Delivery Specialist)
  - Mainstreaming’ (or not)
- Career and professional development

18

## Challenges of *Third Space*: For institutions I



- Encouraging creativity, whilst maintaining oversight...
  - “Maintaining standards without stifling innovation” (Evaluation Specialist)
- Accommodating dissent/challenge:
  - “Until you value dissent you’re not going to be making good decisions” (Media Specialist)
  - “...once someone is seen as a dissenter, how does an organisation deal with them?” (Media Specialist)

19

## Challenges of *Third Space*: For institutions II



- Co-ordination and evaluation of innovation so that it informs institutional strategy
- Being flexible/pragmatic in developing an employment ‘package’ that accommodates and values a range of identities... eg:
  - career and pay frameworks
  - ‘soft’ rewards and incentives
  - workload models
  - promotion criteria

20

## Implications for identities of learning support professionals



<b>Spaces that</b>	Accommodate ambiguity; navigate formal structures; re-define professional boundaries
<b>Knowledges that</b>	Arise from professional and academic activity, application of practice, institutional research; are integrative
<b>Relationships that</b>	Participate in academic debate; create alliances with key partners; develop multi-professional networks
<b>Credibility from</b>	Academic credentials; challenging the status quo; building authority as 'internal consultant'; developing best practice

21

## Bibliography

- Bhabha, H. (1990). The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. J. Rutherford. London, Lawrence and Wishart: 207-221.  
[conferenceproceedings.new\\_link2008.1090007152736.pdf](#)
- Corrall, S. (2005). "Developing models of professional competence". Paper given at Sixth World Conference on Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning for the Library and Information Professions:  
[www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/papers/cpdwl-Corrall.pdf](http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/papers/cpdwl-Corrall.pdf)
- Kehm, B. (2006). Strengthening Quality through Qualifying Mid-Level Management. *Prospects of Change in Higher Education. Towards New Qualities and Relevance: Festschrift for Matthias Wessler*. Eds. M. Fremerey and M. Pletsch-Betancourt. Frankfurt, IKO Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation: 161-171.
- Rhoades, G. (2010). Envisaging Invisible Workforces: Enhancing Intellectual Capital. *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education: The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce*. Eds. G. Gordon and C. Whitchurch. New York, Routledge.
- Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Cambridge: Mass, Blackwell.
- Whitchurch, C. (2008). "Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: The Emergence of *Third Space* Professionals in UK Higher Education". *Higher Education Quarterly* 62(4): 377-396.
- Whitchurch, C. (2008) *Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures. Final Report*. London, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education  
[www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.html](http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.html).

### Recently published:

Whitchurch, C. & Gordon, G. (Eds.). (2010). *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education: The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce*. International Studies in Higher Education. New York: Routledge.

=> <http://www.routledgeeducation.com/books/Academic-and-Professional-Identities-in-Higher-Education-isbn9780415990905>