

Book Review

Emily McIntosh and Diane Nutt (2022) *The Impact of the Integrated Practitioner in Higher Education: Studies in Third Space Professionalism*. Routledge

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There is so much to recommend this book. The individual contributions, augmented by the editors' careful synthesis throughout, are a revelation. And its timing is prescient: it makes a critical and welcome contribution to the sector's thinking and theorising as higher education (HE) globally dares to look hopefully towards a post-pandemic 'better normal'. What COVID-19 has laid bare, if the interminable forces of relentless change prior to 2020 had not already done so, is that the organising principles of the modern university and the identities, roles and contributions of those who work within it, must be reimagined. Pre-pandemic, the massification of HE and endemic funding precarity had already sorely tested the efficacy of traditional structures, functions and workforce profiles and found them to be wanting. Strides in digitisation and digitalisation were not converting easily for a seamless digital transformation of the student experience. The student success remit for increasingly diverse cohorts was underscoring the need for greater institutional nuancing to account for students' individual lived and fluid realities. And the widescale uptake of universal design for learning to assure substantive flexibility and inclusion for all learners continued to remain a work in progress. The total ask was already too much for any one part of the amorphous university whole to deliver coherently from siloed isolation. Then COVID-19 swept around the world and into our institutions.

To assure individualised student success for diverse cohorts in the post-pandemic university, institutions and ways of working must transform and become more relational, permeable and agile. Over COVID-19, Whitchurch's (2012) "third space" became more visible and mainstream out of necessity, emerging from beyond the murky periphery of the institutional ecosystem. The pandemic provided a definitive stress test of HE capability and it was the third space that shone particularly brightly in response. In their boundary-crossing way, third space professionals proved themselves to be the glue that could hold together an ecosystemic institutional response, precisely because the space is unbounded. Silo-breaking was required in very short pandemic order just to get things done. The intermediate practitioners' growth mindset was especially suited to enabling the urgent curation and coordination of complex, non-linear responses across our institutional behemoths.

Indeed, it might be said that, over the course of the pandemic, many colleagues drew on the strengths of third space practice, knowingly or otherwise, as the sector scrambled to deploy emergency remote teaching and support responses. In a crisis-induced blurring of organisational boundaries, many university staff were challenged to work in fluid and liminal spaces. Of necessity, colleagues looked to each other, across disciplinary and professional divides, to support, sustain and humanise the COVID-19 experience for all – both staff and students. Flexible partnerships worked to leverage and reconfigure capability



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and expertise that did not exist disparately. And this was done in joint effort, with good will and despite organisational structures. Specifically, the default became collaborative design, enabled by multi-disciplinary, cross-professional work practices, to assure service delivery for holistic, student-centred pedagogical triage, as best was able in extremis. Reflecting back as I read this book, it was in the third space, cross-cutting the academic and the professional, that most institutional effort was focussed, coalescing around broad “bundles of activity” in the struggle to deliver the large scale sector project that was the HE response to COVID-19 (Whitchurch, 2012, p. 27).

Disruption should drive change and innovation. The traditional ways of working in HE have never been instinctively or overtly collaborative; an inefficient and ineffective, if not wantonly wasteful, approach to HE core business that eschews harnessing in-house capability and distributed expertise. The robust theorising and conceptualisations of the shifting third space collected in this volume, from across multiple and global perspectives, lay sturdy foundations for sustaining structural transformation that leverages the best of our disruption responses as frequently brokered in the third space. The case is made for organisational makeover at scale. In 2022, the sector has a choice. It can retreat back into organisational silos and old ways of thinking, being and doing. Or, it can realign in accord with strong evidence that coordinated, whole-of-institution approaches are what works best for student engagement and success, with far greater impact than disjuncted, ad-hoc interventions. Now that COVID-19 has forced the productive embrace of multi-faceted, collective endeavour, surely there can be no return to relative organisational obscurity for integrated professional practice. It should be normalised, up-scaled and formalised.

But a roadmap is needed to chart this alternative future for HE communities. This book provides the necessary catalyst to galvanise and inspire sector action. The treatment here is rich, practice-honed and theoretically robust. The tensions, challenges and opportunities of the third space are canvassed with clear-sighted analysis and critique. The substantial potential for cementing new configurations, strategic partnerships and cross-boundary relationships that can operate as agile drivers of substantive change is articulated. No future-proofing aspect is unexplored. The book scrutinises blended professionalism and integrated practice from every perspective: leadership and strategy; identities and ways of working; the complex nature of these un-bounded, collaborative spaces; the tested capability for impact; and the necessity for recognition and support to develop sustainable career trajectories. In doing so, the value of the third space professional is expounded through a proliferation of descriptors – as collaborator, champion, translator, connector, mediator, advocate, bulwark, ‘pracademic’, supporter, change agent, innovator, builder, interdisciplinarian, interprofessional, and more besides. Which institutions and sectors would not want such colleagues unleashed and enabled to support their core business?

Across its pages, the book’s editors and authors provide compelling worked examples of the third space’s positive impact on the staff and student experience and, more broadly, on the effective, efficient and inclusive functioning of universities. The narratives of these third space expositions also capture vividly the *affect* of this work: the commitment, dedication and a permeating sense of restlessness and desire for iterative enhancement. The systems thinking approaches inherent in so many of the applications set out here demonstrate the cogency of enabling broader analyses of systemic and structural pressure points. It is trite to observe that many of our institutional problems are replete with intricate interdependencies that demand holistic, multi-faceted responses. Professionals in the third space are frequently best placed to recognise those interrelationships, aggregate motivations, and work in genuine partnerships for creative, and more satisfying, long-term solutions. The (usually) informal leadership capability deployed here sees its outworking in a culture of proactive assumption of responsibility with integrity and accountability that, in turn, engenders cross-institutional confidence and trust. This is difficult and unglamorous, but necessary future-proofing work that deserves greater strategic recognition, validation, support and respect.

Reading this collection, it strikes me also that the stories so persuasively narrated of role ambiguity, adaptability, cross-function problem solving, moral purpose, leadership and (albeit gradual) workforce transformation, resonate strongly with contemporary analyses of the (external) world of future work. The shifting tasks and roles in HE’s third space are redolent of the flexibility-in-action and uniquely human skills that are increasingly demanded of workers by Industry 4.0 and changing labour markets. The ‘future workforce’ is one where the attributes of the third space are highly valued; where multi-disciplinary practice, hybrid skill sets, creative problem solving, compassionate collaboration, networking, empathetic facilitation and teambuilding, resilience and resilient communications are key differentiators. Organisational advantage is further augmented when agentic practitioners harness these attributes to mediate and connect, credibly and influentially, for uplift in institutional adaptability, agency and autonomous sense making. In this framing, third space professionals have anticipated and honed the attributes required for future work.

It may be that the lessons of the third space can be extrapolated even further. Quite fundamentally, the ways of working in the third space also speak to establishing the institutional conditions that can enable the modern university to (re)enact its third mission and honour its mutually beneficial compact with society. To deliver on the common good of public education and

civic engagement, a reconfigured university would leverage the whole, and not just parts, of its integrated enterprise to work through the wicked problems of our turbulent times. Endemic funding shifts do not absolve the sector from rising to meet today's grand challenges: those of supporting populations' (and our students' and staff's) mental wellbeing; promoting reconciliation with First Nations Peoples; actuating lifelong learning; and contributing solutions to enduring global conundrums such as climate change, sustainability, inequality and inequity, poverty, social justice and the other sustainable development goals. As this volume lays out so eloquently, whether it is within the institution or outside it, *integrated* HE practice, and the proponents of it, will be at the forefront of facilitating next generation answers; internally to resolve institutional complexity and externally for universal justice, fairness and social, cultural and economic development. Working *across* academic disciplines and areas of professional expertise, and working respectfully and ethically *with* students, industries, governments and communities in partnership, seems like a response far too long in the making. This may be another application of Denney's "bridging and translation work" (Chapter 4, p 55) – the in-between space – in which new and innovative responses with potential for greatest impact will most likely be generated in broad collaborative endeavour. This imaging presents unique and innovative opportunities to exploit cross-cutting institutional knowledge, capabilities and resources for common societal and educational gain. The mutually beneficial and virtuous cycles of positive outcomes for all learners, citizens, communities and regions serve to underscore the opportunity cost of not leveraging the agentic professionalism and distributed leadership of collaborative and integrated (third space) professionalism. It is a model of critical engagement that behaves us all.

The organisational choice to strive for whole-of-institution approaches that deliver core business with maximum impact for the benefit of all students, staff and constituencies would seem a strategic no-brainer. But it has proven persistently difficult to assure coherent integration across unwieldy organisational silos that are marked more by intractable binaries (teaching vs research, academic vs professional/ third space, student vs staff, fulltime staff vs sessional staff, discipline vs discipline, on-campus vs on-line, in-curricula vs co-/ extra-curricula) than unifying commonalities. As this book exhorts, it is in the third space where connections are being made and the potential for institutional integration can be realised. And if the academy were not so dualistic, might not our institutional health and wellbeing be enhanced and supported through connection, care and collaboration? In education, one of the most human of enterprises, relationships matter. The possibilities replete in the third space are exciting and may just be our salvation in these testing, anxious, resource-poor times.

The editors of and contributors to this book, whose names read like a global who's who for a coalition of the willing on student success, are to be congratulated. They set out a clear and compelling argument for promoting and celebrating the third space at a time when it is greatly needed to secure the educational futures of HE institutions and all those who operate within them.

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