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Feature Article

The Impact of the Integrated Practitioner: Perspectives on Integrated Practice to Enhance Student Success*

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Abstract

What is integrated practice, and how does it apply to student success? In this article we focus on exploring what third space working and integrated practice means, and how it applies to understanding our identity and leadership in student success, in the context of a pandemic-disrupted academy. We consider the ever-changing nature of this important work, especially in the context of the events of the last two years, and discuss how we might lead into the future to effectively situate post-pandemic student success practice within international university strategies, structures and systems. In the context of integrated practice, we consider: how is our understanding of student success evolving? What are student success professionals doing at the moment, and what are the hallmarks of our leadership? How might our identity in this work be understood? What are the core skills/experience required for the future, and how might we lead in uncertain times?

***Keywords**:* Integrated practice; leadership; third space; blended professionalism; student success.

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Introduction

Integrated practice and third space working can lead to more effective student success outcomes. Integrated practice is essential to achieving educational strategy and a huge enabler of working in ways which support students most effectively. Yet, to-date, integrated practice and third space or blended professionalism have not been widely applied to the concept of student success. From 2008 onwards, Celia Whitchurch embarked on a series of international studies intended to define the characteristics of professional staff, where she explored concepts like leadership and identity, culminating in her 2013 monograph on reconstructing identities. Whitchurch defined the third space, which occurs in the spaces between academic

and professional boundaries, and the work of "blended professionals" spanning both academic and professional roles. In 2022 a monograph edited by McIntosh & Nutt explored how third space working and blended professionalism is also a form of integrated practice, where skills, knowledges and identities are shared across professional and academic domains and are thus fused and assimilated in an integrated way. A large number of roles that can accurately be described as being in the third space all impact and support student success in some shape or form. This article considers integrated practice as a way of working more effectively, across recognised institutional boundaries and structures, to address known challenges and to achieve greater student success. It considers how the concept of student success has evolved in recent times, and argues that how and what we work on (most especially how we leverage the opportunities of integrated practice and third space working) is also changing, and has made the benefits of integrated practice more visible, inevitably impacting our leadership, identity and ways of working.

Evolving Definitions of Integrated Practice and Student Success

Just over ten years ago, Celia Whitchurch described the creation of new spaces at the interface of academic and professional activity, and focussed specifically on the opportunities and challenges associated with working across complex institutional boundaries and structures, something which revealed the importance of navigating and negotiating as a way and means of working. Whitchurch's observations were based on a wide-ranging internationally focussed research project in the US, the UK and Australia (Whitchurch, 2009 & 2013). Whitchurch described this context as the "third space", and those working within that space as either third space or blended professionals. This evolution of working that Whitchurch described several years ago has been a constant challenge to the organising principles of the academy ever since. These organising principles are also changing, to increasingly accommodate those who work across academic and professional divides. Those who work in this way are invariably tasked with gaining consensus, bringing together and curating many disparate threads of the university experience for the benefit of colleagues and students (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022).

Those working in the third space were especially pivotal during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they became a lot more visible, when agility and lateral thinking were required to work on ever more complex concerns (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022). Known measures of student success such as continuation, persistence, completion and satisfaction were all impacted by a sector whose sense of community, connectedness and interaction were completely uprooted. As Kift (2022) has written: "pre-pandemic, the massification of higher education and endemic funding precarity had already sorely tested the efficacy of traditional structures, functions and workforce profiles and found them to be wanting" (p. 59). When the pandemic hit, the structures and systems were probably not robust enough to withstand this huge shift in the way we work. This latest assault on our structures, systems and values, has forced yet another rethink about what integrated practice is, and how it impacts the way we work in the academy (Quinsee, 2022). Ultimately it also impacts how we conceptualise, support and champion student success.

As our understanding and conceptualisation of the third space has developed considerably in recent years, it has included new typologies to describe this way of working (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022). The concept of integrated practice and, indeed, the integrated practitioner, has also emerged as a means of understanding how those working in the third space, as blended professionals, naturally assimilate new knowledges, skills, legitimacies and relationships. It is this means of working in higher education (HE) that has paved the way for a number of new and existing roles to develop, many of which are in support of student success in some shape or form. In the US, for example, Pistilli and Gardner (2022) have described how this way of working has caused such an exponential shift that a whole new "professional class" focused on student success has emerged. In the UK, Jonathan Grant described third space roles as part of the shifting staffing base in universities, citing a huge expansion of the third space to what he calls the emerging "new power" (2021). Those working in such roles, across the international HE sector, include among other areas, student success advisors and those working in careers or employability, student retention, student learning development, student mental health and wellbeing, peer learning and academic advising.

Student success is therefore shaped and impacted by how we work in the academy, the way that we are organised, and the way in which student success principles inform what we do, and our value base (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022). Like integrated practice, student success is also hard to define. It differs across international contexts and is shaped and impacted by so many factors, not least by the participation of large numbers of students in HE, their own diverse and personalised context and the educational journeys which have brought them to tertiary education in the first place. Our understanding of what student success actually is, like integrated practice, also continues to evolve. In the UK, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2021) adds:

> Student success cannot be measured through progression and completion rates alone. Success means different things to different students at different points in their journey through higher education. Success lives as much in the corridors of an institution as it does in the classroom or in the curriculum.

Rather than trying to achieve a reductive definition of student success, it is important to appreciate the multitude of factors which impact students in the academy, and those phenomena which can be understood from a variety of international HE perspectives. These multiple factors are also central to third space working and integrated practice – they require working across boundaries, collaborative approaches, bridging divides and developing multiple insights. As our understanding of student success has evolved, largely as a result of increasing and varied institutional and external drivers, the way we approach our work, how we affiliate ourselves, and how we actually work in practice have equally evolved and arguably become much more visible.

We therefore argue that student success is best enabled and prioritised through third space working and integrated practice. We suggest that both should be considered together in order to understand how the identity, leadership and ways of working of student success professionals can best be realised and properly supported, not least by exploring and formalising the spaces in which they work, their integrated practices and the impact they have on students. As Kift (2022) notes: "to assure individualised student success for diverse cohorts in the post-pandemic university, our institutions and ways of working must transform and become more relational, permeable and agile" (p. 59). To explore the concept of integrated practice in in this context further, in the next section we use Whitchurch's 2009 *Conceptual Framework of Blended Professionals* and apply this to working in the multiple fields of student success.

Integrated Practice, Third Space Working and Student Success

Conceptualising the Work of Student Success Professionals

In 2009, Celia Whitchurch published her conceptual framework which further develops the concept of the blended professional, characterising individuals with identities drawn from both professional and academic domains, and examining the (1) institutional spaces, (2) knowledges, (3) relationships and (4) legitimacies that they negotiate. In this article we apply this model to student success professionals in order to reveal how these four dimensions of practice have evolved alongside our understanding of student success, to enable those working in the third space to improve outcomes for students.

Student Success Spaces

Whitchurch considered the spaces that blended professionals occupy, noting their ability to offer multiple understandings of the institution/sector, often accommodating the ambiguity between the professional and academic domains that traditionally divide the student educational experience. The ability to occupy, even "broker" these academic and professional spaces is hugely important to breaking down the barriers and silos that exist in most universities. This is especially important to supporting the student journey – including transition, induction, student services (broadly conceived) as well as academic advising, personal tutoring and curricular structures. By fluidly working across all these boundaries, both perceived and real, those working in student success are able to re-define and modify professional spaces and boundaries in ways that are much more constructive for students, and which facilitate a much smoother experience. Often the structures and systems dominating the academy cause students to fall between the cracks. The extent of the "complex collaboration" required to do this effectively is a unique and fundamental skill for those working across different spaces, and they often work around formal structures navigating what Whitchurch calls "supercomplexity" (2009). Veles, Carter and Boon (2019) discussed the role of these "complex collaboration champions" in Australia, often working across institutions, in a thematic way, using collaboration as their main sense of agency. Below we consider how this dominant way of working impacts the identity of student success professionals.

Student Success Knowledges

At the same time as working with agility across formal structures and systems, those working in the third space, often supporting student success, create and maintain knowledges. Whitchurch noted that third space professionals were able to embed and integrate both professional and academic knowledge. We argue that this assimilation of different types of "knowledges" is absolutely fundamental to supporting students and their journey. Often, those working in student success roles undertake research into institutional activity, adding to the scholarship and evidence base which is used to support and enable students to thrive. This creation of what Whitchurch calls an "interactive knowledge environment" has enabled us to prioritise the values associated with student success, helping to anchor the work that we do in times of increased uncertainty and volatility. Student success professionals are therefore able to apply their expertise to complex individual tasks, often in the face of a metricised sector. In our recent edited collection, we argue that this way of working promotes and enables the

concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), where those who work in various roles associated with student success have organised themselves into vibrant and knowledgeable academic and professional communities, promoting and sharing their work, not least via research and publication. STARS (Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention, Success) is one such affiliated knowledge network, based in Australasia. Another is the European First Year Experience Network (EFYEN) in Europe, with those whose interests and activities support first year transition having coalesced to transcend and share their professional expertise, often in response to multiple complex challenges. Later on in this article, we explore how participation in knowledge networks has impacted positively identity, leadership and ways of working in this space.

Student Success Relationships

Those working in roles associated with student success also build and nurture strong relationships and this is the predominant form of capital that their work is based on. The ability to work relationally, across both professional and academic divides, enables those who work with agility to enter and understand academic discourse and debate, and form alliances with key partners, most especially students. Often this has been described as "joining the dots" between different areas of the university (Campbell-Perry, 2022), and is fundamentally associated with the spaces and knowledges we explore above. A key part of developing these relationships – between academics, professionals, external partners, industry, with students and other stakeholders – is designed to facilitate autonomy and the development of colleagues working in this space. These relationships allow integrated practitioners to be reflective, to develop their practice and to construct networks, both internally and externally. Often these networks are based on values and interests, with relational principles based on affiliative connections rather than formal university structures. The quality of relationships is fundamental to leadership in this space.

Student Success Legitimacies

Finally, student success professionals, and the way in which they work, have huge legitimacy in the academy. Many of them have academic credentials, enabling them to broker the many spaces that they occupy – and this helps achieve credibility in academic debate/space. This legitimacy often helps to challenge assumptions and accepted wisdom which is fundamental given the level of external challenges faced by universities at present. Challenging accepted thinking and the traditional narratives of student success, then helping students to flourish, can be achieved by disrupting the status quo. Often the exercise of joining up the dots, mentioned above, enables those working in this way to negotiate and navigate huge levels of change, and to manage the duality of belonging and not belonging to academic spaces. This inevitable tension offers, we argue, a unique ability to see the academy from the point of view of the student – the inevitable "supercomplexity" that the student is also experiencing across their learning journey. The ability to challenge and the idea of legitimacy is a critical one and it impacts our understanding of student success leadership as well as identity. We will now consider the impact of all four dimensions of Whitchurch's model in a little more detail on identity, leadership and ways of working.

Making Sense of Identity in the Third Space

Many of those working in integrated practice contexts, whether that be working on third space projects and activities from conventional professional and academic roles, or from more complex blended third space roles, talk about imposter syndrome. The academy often seems to portray an image of clear demarcation of activity and role; and in relation to student success this line is often imagined to be between academic and professional roles. And yet as we have argued above, to support student success and instigate changes and enhanced practices that impact on student outcomes, we need to work across this demarcation, or in a space between (for example, on a cross boundary thematic project). Institutional change that impacts on the student journey cannot only happen in the conventional classroom, or in a student services department. For example, at an institutional level, genuinely impacting positively on retention and completion, or on recruiting and supporting the success of students from non-traditional backgrounds can only happen if people are working together across the demarcation. But one of the challenges for those working "in-between" is the lack of recognition and validation for this work. This work has often been invisible (Hall, 2022). In both academic and professional settings career recognition and progression is far easier to achieve within your discipline or field. Those of us who work across disciplines and fields can feel like a "jack of all trades, master of none" (Beckingham, 2022).

But in contrast, thinking about this work through Whitchurch's conceptual framework and using Veles et al.'s (2019), notion of "complex collaboration champions", we can provide tools to combat imposter syndrome and ways to find validating markers of identity. It is perhaps worth noting that some people working in the third space do not see the term as helpful for making sense of their identity in boundary work. For example, some have felt that it puts this work in third place after academic and professional, which for some re-emphasises the way this work can be devalued. We would argue that the term "integrated practice" is one way to address this ambiguity.

In our book (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022), many of the chapter authors consider their sense of identity in working across boundaries within HE, and while not all are working in specific student success roles or activities, they have found routes to making sense of their identities. They have for example, found working with a mentor has helped them to battle imposter syndrome (Beckingham, 2022), or developed their networks (and in some cases created networks, Hulme (2022)) and applied for recognition markers to validate their practice and their place in the academy, for example through (UK) PSF Fellowships[1], or CMALT accreditation[2] (Nutt, 2022).

The pandemic brought many of those who work in integrated practice to the forefront as institutions had to switch to different ways of working at speed (drawing on educational developers, learning technologists, student support advisors etc), and mental health and wellbeing issues became even more visibly significant for students and staff. In a very short time frame institutions had to draw on the spaces, knowledges, relationships and legitimacies of blended professionals. These previously often invisible practitioners were vitally important to the ongoing success of students. Those institutions with more established third space working processes were far more ready to cope with the changes. We all have personal stories of adapting to the challenges of this moment through working across the demarcation line. Quinsee (2022) argues that we need to grasp this experience and highlight the skills which were valuable and demonstrate their value for the longer term. This is a particularly important challenge for those leading integrated practice.

While many voices are talking about "returning to normal", the reality is that some of the changes have been important and positive ones for universities in the 21st century. The practices adopted by many institutions (alternative assessment modes; more online and hybrid learning; enhanced wellbeing and mental health support services and processes, that are often now aligned or integrated into discipline contexts rather than sitting outside) also have value for supporting students in more "normal" times signalling that integrated practice will continue to be important for the future of universities.

Does this mean that the imposter syndrome and sense of insecurity in relation to identity will disappear for those who work on student success activities in the third space? We suspect not, in general universities have a deep and established culture of differentiation. However, we see many positives and believe that this is a potential turning point for student success and for universities across many countries to take stock and we note a growth in leadership from integrated practitioners and leaders who are committed to supporting those in their institutions who are working in third spaces and supporting student success from these settings (Denney, 2021; Denney, 2022; Grant, 2021; Hall, 2022; Marshall, 2016).

But whether your role is clearly a leadership one in this field, or is as a less visible student success practitioner working "behind the scenes", there remain a number of ways to find identity confidently through integrated practice. One way to find a place is through participating in knowledge networks. In particular, networks which themselves bring together people working across boundaries, or in a range of roles and positions. Finding like-minded people is a way to gain support and validation, but there is a real benefit too in being part of knowledge networks that bring together those with different roles but some common goals: academics, researchers, professional services staff, students, managers, and the wide range of third space practitioners who work on student success projects. As highlighted above, conferences like STARS in Australasia and EFYE in Europe create vital spaces for sharing knowledges, building relationships and finding legitimacies. These can be challenging spaces at times, but they are also places to move agendas forward and to learn.

Leadership and Ways of Working on Student Success through an Integrated Practice Lens

As we have suggested above, leadership in, and of, integrated practice is key to developing practices that support student success. Several recent debates and publications have highlighted the importance of leading universities in the 21st century across a range of countries including the UK and Australia (Benner, et al. 2022; Grant, 2021; Hall, 2022; McVitty, 2022). Many of these discussions have highlighted learning from the pandemic and emphasise strategies that focus on student experience.

We would argue that leadership in, and of, the third space is not necessarily leadership from a place of authority, although it can be, but is more often leadership through influence: the spaces integrated practitioners create for thematic working, the knowledges they bring to these spaces, the relationships that they have built to draw others into the work, and the legitimacy they have gained, which creates trust and opportunity.

[1]UK Professional Standards Framework https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/fellowship/fellowship
[2] CMALT Accreditation Framework https://www.alt.ac.uk/certified-membership

Core to integrated practice is how we work and what we work on. Leadership in the third space has some overlap with the concept of "systems convening" (Wenger-Trayner, 2021) in that change is brought about through an understanding and focus on systems, practices and relationships (p. 86). Many leaders of integrated practice have "travelled" (p. 88) between roles, industries, fields, departments and between academic and professional jobs. Hall (2022) writing from the perspective of a university leader who was an educational developer: "from a leadership perspective, the skills of a 'third space professional' are those that will ensure universities adapt and survive as hegemonic discourses are disrupted" (p. 26). Hall sees the "hybrid identities" of integrated practice as potentially having a vital role in the "reimagining of universities". Grant (2021) similarly sees the third space as key to the future of universities. Hall is concerned however about the relative invisibility of third space work and argues that it is the role of senior leaders to create spaces for disruption and for integrated practitioners to do their work openly. Both Grant and Hall advocate strongly for universities to make the third space visible and more central to institutional practice.

But what does leadership in the third space mean on the ground, rather than at university senior leadership level? How do those of us working in these spaces lead effectively to support student success. How does integrated practice work in the context of student success activities?

In our book there are several examples of student success working and leadership. These examples are complex and identify both the positives and the challenges of leading integrated practice. For example, Shelton (2022) who was a 'Head of Student Experience' explores the development of a university student experience framework. To achieve this she: created a student focused space; drew on the knowledges from her own third space journey and that of colleagues and students across departments and disciplines; and worked with established relationships and built new relationships between students, academics and professional staff. In writing about her experience, Shelton considers her legitimacies, and recognises both the success of the initiative in impacting positively on student experiences and gaining positive responses from staff and institutional management, but she also acknowledges the fact that there are limitations to this success, because not all departments have fully engaged. The framework is seen as centrally owned. The students who were key to its development and effectiveness have since graduated and finding ways to keep the connection with departments and new students is not always easy. This, then highlights some of the ambivalence of leadership in the third space.

However, the example also highlights, as many do, the importance of relationships for integrated practice in student success. Our work (McIntosh & Nutt 2022) emphasises the importance of relationships in integrated practice perhaps because of some of the challenges of working across boundaries in HE. And while all relationships are important to this endeavour, a particularly positive characteristic of Shelton's work, and of several other examples in the book, is the relationships between students and staff working together in student success settings.

Going beyond consulting students and even involving students, there is a strong argument for acknowledging more specifically that students can be, and in student success work often are, integrated practitioners themselves. When working on a cross university project to support student success (for example a retention or widening participation project) students are often equal partners in developing practices and making changes that will impact student achievement and enhance student journeys, and they bring a vital perspective. Students who are working in third spaces are on their own identity journeys. Carey (2022) in writing about the importance of integrated practice in student engagement and success describes how he began his integrated practice as a student and reflects on how this shapes his sense of identity, "On reflection, having worked in the student engagement, progression and success field for almost 20 years, I wonder if I was actually trying to find a place to belong (Foster, 2011, Thomas 2012)" Carey (p. 209). Carey describes two particular examples of working in third space projects led, or significantly shaped, by students to forge student success: developing a new online student portal; and setting up an assessment literacy initiative. The key to Carey's work, and to that of Ody (2022) who writes about student peer education, is true student partnership in cross-institutional working.

Another example of working effectively in the third space on student success initiatives comes from Millard and Lowe (2022). The two authors (one from an academic background the other professional services) work in a central "Educational Services" department that delivers academic staff development and student personal development. They argue that working in the third space provides opportunities to "work in ways that others [in the academy] cannot" (p.188). Integrated practitioners can, and do, work outside the boxes of academic and professional frames. This enables them to be "positive disruptors" as well as problem solvers. But it is worth noting that Millard and Lowe also talk about the responsibility that comes with the opportunity, a responsibility to support students and staff and to work to create a shared vision for student success. A key message of their work is collaboration and creating spaces for collaboration to happen in safe but sometimes challenging ways. They describe two third space projects (a graduate+ employability initiative and an assessment centre development) and explain their collaborative approaches and show how integrated practice was particularly effective in moving these two agendas forward.

We have provided several examples in this section to explore student success through a third space lens. We recognise that there are many more we could have shared. We selected these examples to highlight the ways in which Whitchurch's framework might play out for student success activity. Ways of working in the third space and how we lead as integrated practitioners can make an enormous difference to student success, however we define it. To end this section, we will briefly identify a number of key skills for effective integrated practice that are worth considering if we are to take an integrated practice approach to working on student success.

Quinsee (2022) identified fluidity and agility as core skills and uses the pandemic response as an example of the value of these attributes. Denney (2022) in her research with leaders who are educational developers identified bridging skills and translating skills as core to the practice of educational developers leading effectively. Skills in developing and supporting partnerships, relationship building, and collaboration came to the fore in the work of Carey, Millard and Lowe, Ody and Shelton. Listening skills are perhaps a key part of developing and supporting partnerships (Carey). Persistence and imagination are vital for problem solving, which is an attribute many third space practitioners mention. We would add that an awareness of the bigger picture in HE and some understanding of wider HE policy can be a valuable part of effective integrated practice.

Conclusion: Current Issues and Future Challenges

Grant (2021) introduced the idea of the new power university, which has an expanded third space. he sees the recognition of third space working and the expansion of third space activities as fundamental to the future of universities. To move forward and address new problems and challenges in the world, universities need to adapt away from a traditional separation of activities to a more integrated approach to addressing issues. The challenges of supporting student success, in all its complexity clearly would benefit from this shift to a more integrated approach and to cross boundary working. The pandemic has given us a glimpse into how some of this could work and also into some of the difficulties.

A key issue that we would argue is important to moving forward from here is that recognition of the third space and of integrated practice is vitally important to enable effectiveness. Integrated practitioners have always had some success from the shadows, but greater success can be achieved with real recognition, reward and leadership of, and through, the third space. Integrated practice is happening in all institutions and is more or less visible and more or less valued. It does not undermine academic freedom or intellectual and research excellence, but rather can enable universities to support their various missions far more effectively. While this article has focused on student success, integrated practitioners are working in all elements of university practice: research spaces and knowledge transfer being two other key examples (Lock, 2022). It benefits, as Grant (2021) has argued, all universities, whatever their mission, to better understand, value and validate third spaces, third space working and integrated practitioners.

While the pandemic provided some strong evidence of the value of third space roles to universities and to university leadership and showed the real importance of working across role boundaries to support student success, it is notable that there is now a great deal of rhetoric about going back to 'normal' from both senior managers and academia across western countries. This is a challenging moment – integrated practitioners and work in the third space has been a vital element, if not the most vital element of survival and supporting student success through challenging times. Academics, and those who have worked directly in teaching spaces worked with, and were supported by, professional staff in new ways – this is real third space work and it does impact student success, but it was also hard work under stress and many people remember nostalgically an apparently simpler approach and a sense of identity that was recognisable and often hard won (academics and professional staff work hard to become who they are, and many enter the professions with a desire for the identity that accompanies that profession). The advantages of new ways of working, and of a full recognition of integrated practice can also seem potentially threatening to professional identities, which already seem under-threat from government policy and the financial imperatives of universities as businesses.

But what we see as most important here is how well we worked together in difficult times. It is this working together and relationship building that provides the most optimistic route forward for those of us working inside and across HE. Leaders who support third space initiatives and practices and value integrated practice alongside, and integrated with, academia, research and professional practice have the vision for a future where student success is part of all our work.

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