Introduction

This Small Development Project builds on an earlier study funded by the Leadership Foundation entitled *Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures* (Whitchurch, 2006; 2008a). One of the outcomes of this study was to identify the fact that as higher education institutions, and their workforces, have expanded and diversified to meet the demands of contemporary environments, boundaries between professional and academic spheres of activity are becoming blurred. As a result, what Whitchurch has termed a “Third Space” has opened up, requiring contributions from a range of professionals, and creating new dimensions to the workforce map, as shown in Figure 1 (Whitchurch, 2008a and b). In this space, individuals have emerged who are capable of performing “blended” roles, comprising elements of both academic and professional activity (Whitchurch, 2009). However, this has been a relatively un-remarked development, and the current study addresses in more detail the nature of Third Space, and working practices within it. With this aim, the following research questions were established:

- How might working practices in a Third Space between professional and academic spheres of activity be characterised, including:
  - Relationships between professional and academic staff.
  - Relationships with external constituencies.
  - The nature of management and leadership in this space.
- What are the opportunities and challenges offered by Third Space?
  - For individuals.
  - For institutions.

The project focused on staff employed on professional, rather than academic, contracts, although some of them had undertaken academic roles in contiguous environments such as adult and further education. It comprised two in-depth case studies, one in a pre-1992 (‘Pre-92’), and one in a post-1992 (‘Post-92’) institution in the UK, and sought to extend understandings of working practices and identities within Third Space, rather than to draw direct comparisons between the institutions themselves.
**Figure 1:** The Emergence of *Third Space* between Professional and Academic Spheres of Activity

![Diagram of Third Space]

(Reproduced from Whitchurch, 2008a and b)

**Background**

The concept of *Third Space*, in the context of higher education, was devised in response to a series of binary divisions found in the literature (for instance, Fulton 2003; Peters, 2004; Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007; Kogan and Teichler, 2007; Enders and de Weert, 2009). These centre around what has been seen as a clear division between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ (or ‘academic related’ or ‘support’) activity, and associated staff groupings. Such divisions reflect a perceived split between ‘collegial’ approaches, implying academic autonomy, and ‘managerial’ approaches, in which institutional agendas are seen as serving socio-economic goals, so that ‘academic’ and ‘management’ activity, particularly, have become polarised. In practice, however, these categories are not as clear-cut as is sometimes assumed. In relation to professional staff themselves, these binaries also include divisions between ‘generalists’ and ‘specialists’, and between ‘managers’ and ‘administrators’. The lack of clarity around terminology is reinforced by the fact that, in the past, the term ‘manager’ has tended to be associated with senior academic managers such as Pro-Vice-Chancellors and Heads of Administration, and ‘administrator’ with generalist professional staff. Because of difficulties in the terminology associated with ‘administration’ and ‘management’, therefore, ‘professional staff’ will be used in this report to refer to staff not having academic contracts.

Convergence and even coalescence of professional and academic spheres of activity can be attributed in part to government agendas that link the acquisition of skills to
the knowledge economy and regional regeneration, with the expectation that a larger, more diverse student body will be facilitated via developments in online learning. As institutions are drawn into these agendas, and collaboration with external partners, they have been obliged to recognize a more complex set of roles, tasks and opportunities. As a result, an intermingling of academic and professional activity has occurred alongside traditional organisational structures and processes. Significant numbers of professional staff on ‘non-academic’ contracts now have academic credentials and experience, and “blended” roles have developed in areas such as widening participation, learning support and community partnership (Whitchurch, 2009). Nevertheless, conceptual boundaries remain deep rooted, whereby both professional and academic staff may see the other as more privileged, and themselves as marginalized (see for instance, Deem, Hillyard and Reed 2007; Kogan and Teichler 2007; Stromquist 2007; Enders and de Weert 2009, in relation to academic staff, and Dobson and Conway 2003; and Szekeres 2004, in relation to professional staff). Even where it has been acknowledged that “simple diarchical assumptions do not hold” (Kogan and Teichler, 2007: 11), academic and professional staff are seen as having distinct areas of influence, so that academic staff:

“… are professionals in academic matters, but amateurs in matters of shaping the university and… a new group of experts… are amateurs in academic matters but professionals in shaping the university” (Kogan and Teichler, 2007: 14).

More recently, there has begun to be some recognition that the diversity and range of staff in contemporary higher education have been underplayed, as well as the complexity of activities that they, and their academic colleagues, undertake collaboratively. Thus, it has been suggested that “dichotomous analyses of managerialism and professionalism [including academic activity] are now outmoded” (Kolsaker, 2008: 523), although there has been less evidence of new identity frames in which to place these concepts. Shelley (2009), who uses Bourdieu to analyse the changing sources of legitimacy of research managers, is a notable exception. Furthermore, the question of what ‘management’ might mean tends not to be addressed in broad-brush divisions of activity into ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’. As Musselin points out, there are elements of ‘management’ involved in ‘academic’ activities such as running a course programme or research team, and academic staff expect to be involved in developing research and consultancy contracts, e-learning and technology transfer (Musselin, 2007: 177). Such activities are increasingly likely to involve collaboration and crossover with professional specialists in these fields.

**The concept of Third Space**

The current project suggests that the concept of *Third Space* may help to overcome the dichotomies described above. The concept derives from sociology, and has been used to theorise the relationships between cultural groups (for instance Bhabha, 1990, 1994; Soja, 1996). It has been applied by Whitchurch to higher education (Whitchurch, 2008a and b) to represent space “that is not simply the space of one discipline [or function/activity] or another, but a third, or supplementary space” (Bhabha quoted in Mitchell, 1995:11). While Musselin implies convergence between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ work (Musselin, 2007: 184), and Kolsaker a process of adaptation whereby academic staff “appear to be making sense of and adapting to the changing environment whilst retaining a strong sense of professional identity”
(Kolsaker, 2008: 523), it may be that *Third Space* also offers the opportunity for new forms of activity and identity to arise. It may, therefore, give stimulus to individuals to “reflect and reinvent themselves” (Dowd and Kaplan, 2005: 704), outwith dichotomies presented by given “rules and resources” (Giddens, 1991). This applies particularly to the group categorised by Dowd and Kaplan as “Connectors”, who:

“… view themselves as consultants, writers, trainers, and freelancers… have extremely well-developed networks of associates within and outside their current institution… were comfortable with the ambiguity inherent in their institutions’ guidelines and policies… [and] open to a variety of academic and non-academic career opportunities should they then not receive tenure, and could see themselves being successful in a variety of career environments outside their current employer” (Dowd and Kaplan, 2005: 714-715).

Although Dowd and Kaplan were referring to academic staff, who were the subject of their study, the characteristics of this group are equally applicable to professional staff, particularly those categorised by Whitchurch as “blended” (Whitchurch, 2009). Musselin notes a similar trend:

“The logic of staff organizing around… projects is first of all based on individual professional competences rather than on qualifications (specific degrees and credentials), while autonomy at work, responsibility, accountability and individual performance within a collective group become more important than hierarchical authority and vertical control” (Musselin, 2007: 184).

*Third Space* is characterised not only by professional staff and academic staff who cross over into what might be seen as the ‘other’s’ territory, but also by people who work in areas that comprise both ‘academic’ and ‘professional’ activity, such as outreach (for instance giving talks at student ‘taster’ events), or translating academic activity into consultancy services oriented towards the community or local business. A partnership manager, for instance, may tread a careful path between gaining the confidence of external colleagues in a regional development agency, learning from them and building knowledge for the institution on the basis of this, at the same time as encouraging institutional colleagues to interact in ways that will benefit both partners. Such staff are likely to have academic credentials in the form of both qualifications and experience. Thus, Shelley notes that job advertisements for research managers began to specify doctorates from 2004 onwards (Shelley, 2009: 9), and that the requirement for post holders to contribute to institutional research policy creates a “shared space of tension” or “shifting arena” (Shelley, 2009: 20). Similarly, Middlehurst’s concept of “borderlessness” suggests the colonisation of new spaces, incorporating ideas of professionalism that comprise “both traditional and new elements, notably increasing customer-focus, specialised and expanded skills”; the crossing of “geographical and time and space boundaries as well as definitional boundaries, boundaries of operations, sectors, identity and culture”; and “new configurations of roles, operations and organizations” (Middlehurst, 2010). Kehm, likewise, picks up a sense of movements that are occurring:

“…we can observe developments that are either increasingly less linked to routine administrative tasks or created particularly outside such routines” (Kehm, 2006: 169).

She sees these new roles as synthesizing, facilitating, championing and implementing institutional development, although they are not always openly acknowledged.
The concept of *Third Space*, therefore, might be seen as a way of describing those institutional locations that represent “complex intersections of multiple places, historical temporalities, and subject positions” (Mitchell, 1995: 1). Furthermore, while the broadly based projects outlined in Figure 1 are given as established examples of *Third Space* activity, the concept also offers a way of exploring working practices that occur in clusters or ‘patches’, among a sub-set of individuals working in what might be seen as ‘mainstream’ areas.

**New spaces**

Convergence between professional and academic activity, and relationships with external partners, has created new types of space represented by, for instance:

- Student placements with local employers and work-based learning.
- Online and multi-media programmes.
- Networking between students, staff and representatives of the local community.
- Community enterprise and outreach.

Joint professional and academic activity is likely to occur at a number of levels and in distributed locations, including:

- Academic departments, faculties and schools.
- Student services, including for instance offices of widening participation and learning support.
- Academic practice, teaching and learning and professional development units.
- Library, information and media services.

Schools and faculties, for instance, increasingly appoint their own staff in relation to functions as diverse as public relations, research spin out and business development. Such working arrangements might be said to resemble a “transformative” form of organisation, “where work is more team-based, hierarchies are flattened and considerable attention is paid to long-term goals and to the management of organisational cultures” (Deem, 1998: 50). Likewise, Bolden, Petrov and Gosling highlight the increasing significance of informal networks in influencing institutional decision-making and development, involving individuals who are “only partially recognised in formal organisational structures” (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2007: 78). Hockey and Allen-Collinson, also, suggest that social networks are a significant element in the organisational capital of research administrators (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2009: 152), and that institutional capital is increasingly located outwith traditional, hierarchical structures and processes. Furthermore, changes in the environment have also resulted in a diversification of the higher education workforce, as well as a ‘casualization’ arising from the increased use of part-time and short-term contracts, the rise of the concept of the ‘internal consultant’, and moves towards more learner-centred and client-oriented services (Gordon and Whitchurch, 2010).

Finally, commentators on other sectors also underline the significance of cross boundary working. It has been suggested that the twenty-first century will be characterized by increased mobility (Moynagh and Worsley, 2005) and innovative organizational practice (Dodgson, Gann and Salter, 2005). Furthermore, “As human
interactions become more central to work, organisations employing individuals who work well together will secure a competitive advantage” (Moynagh and Worsley, 2005: 3). If, as claimed by Hamel, “the work of managing will be less and less performed by ‘managers’”, flatter, more fluid organisational arrangements will be sought, whereby:

- Capability will count for more that credentials or titles…
- Commitment will be voluntary rather than coercive…
- Authority will be fluid and contingent upon value-added…
- Ideas will compete on an equal footing…
- Decisions will be peer based… (Hamel, 2007: 253-254).

The project therefore sought to achieve a better understanding of Third Space not simply as representing ‘other’ activity that does not fit into one of the traditional binary categories of ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ (or in the case of this study, ‘professional’), but as a new form of space in its own right. It is therefore developed as a concept that represents “‘interstitial articulation that both holds together and ‘comes between’ - not only in the sense of being a space or mode of passage, but in the colloquial sense of ‘coming between’, that is… making possible and making trouble, both at once’ ” (Bhabha, quoted in Mitchell, 1995: 9). Cultural difference is negotiated and reconciled, so as to “think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha, 1994: 1-2). Following Soja (1996), the concept of Third Space has been used to “capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances and meanings” (Soja, 1996: 2) in relation to, for instance, professional staff who undertake work which, in a purely academic framework, they might be excluded from, such as outreach teaching or authoring publications on institutional research.

**Case institutions and respondents**

The two case institutions, Pre-92 and Post-92, were chosen because each contained established examples of areas of activity that could be characterised as Third Space, one focusing on Learning and Programme Support, and the other on Community and Business Partnership. In both, the majority of respondents were female, reinforcing indications from Whitchurch’s earlier study that women appear to find it easier to work in less well-defined or boundaried environments. More than twice as many respondents in Pre-92 than in Post-92 had master’s or doctorate level qualifications, which may account for the fact that a significantly greater number of people at Post-92 saw gaining further qualifications as being helpful to their future career. Furthermore, respondents at Post-92 were generally younger (in the 26-35 age band). In both institutions, about one quarter of respondents had worked in the sector previously, with an even spread having other types of public sector experience. 31% of respondents in Pre-92, and 25% in Post-92, had worked in the private sector, which may be a higher proportion than those in ‘mainstream’ roles, although this could only be verified via a larger study. However, over 80% of respondents in both institutions saw themselves as remaining in higher education, either in a similar or a different type of role, which suggests that there is a place for ‘career professionals’ in Third Space, and that the working conditions are by and large attractive to them.
There was a much lower turnover at Pre-92, where over 70% of respondents had been in post over five years, in direct contrast to Post-92, where over 70% of respondents had been in post less than one year. This may have been due to the fact that there were twice as many fixed term contracts at Post-92, and also that the university was located in a large inner city where there were more employment opportunities. Taking Grades 7-8 of the national salary scales as representing ‘middle management’, 84% of respondents at Pre-92 were in this band, compared with 56% at Post-92. This was reflected in a higher level of management responsibilities for staff, budgets and operational activities at Pre-92. However, although over twice as many respondents in Pre-92 than at Post-92 saw themselves as ‘general managers’, there was rough parity in relation to those seeing themselves as ‘functional specialists’, ‘project managers’ or ‘higher education managers’. In both institutions, the majority (79%) of respondents line managed five or less staff. Although those at Pre-92 appeared to have significantly more contact with academic colleagues on a daily basis than those at Post-92, similar numbers saw themselves as having parity with such colleagues.

The range of experience and backgrounds of respondents included:

External to Higher Education

- Teaching in schools and the college sector (including adult and further education)
- Partnership working
- Media/publishing
- Business/manufacturing sector
- Data management
- Employer engagement
- Youth work
- Project management
- Organisation development.

Within Higher Education

- Programme production and development
- Widening participation/outreach
- Enterprise
- Community partnership
- Software and Web development
- E-learning and ICT support
- Project management
- Research and surveys
- Policy development
- Strategic planning
- Work-based learning
- Student support
- Quality assurance.

The seven categories of activity most frequently mentioned as part of their current portfolio by respondents were as follows:
• Programme development
• Widening participation
• Community and business partnership
• Professional and academic practice
• Learning support
• Institutional planning
• Communications and public relations.

The ten people interviewed worked predominantly in widening participation, outreach, learning support, programme development and community and business partnership. They therefore interacted with a range of constituencies including academic staff, students and prospective students, employers, local businesses, and regional and funding agencies. When asked about their roles and identities, a sense of in-between-ness was evident. Whereas some were able to position themselves across a number of known activities, so that “[I have] multiple identities: research, teaching and learning professional, project manager”, others found precise description more difficult in that, for instance, “there is a job to be done but it can’t quite be articulated”. Often they were working on activity that was contiguous with academic activity and involved a knowledge of academic content, for instance writing bids for grants, reports arising out of research or consultancy projects, and material supporting the delivery of academic programmes.

Methodology

As a basis for comparison, particular attention was paid to individuals working in the broad ‘project’ areas of Learning and Programme Support and Community and Business Partnership, the latter including widening participation. These areas, which involved a mix of academic and professional participants, sometimes including external partners, might be seen as ‘freestanding’ Third Space. Other individuals were to be found in ‘patches’ of Third Space, for instance in a faculty environment. However, the ‘freestanding’ examples of Learning and Programme Support and Community and Business Partnership were used in the study to illustrate the possibility of moving beyond some of the dichotomies found in the literature, and to offer a framework in which to analyse what is happening in Third Space, and the processes by which new roles and identities are being constructed.

An electronic questionnaire was administered to 213 individuals on professional contracts of employment (Appendix A). The response rate was 32% in Pre-92 and 40% in Post-92, a total of 73 respondents. Questions seeking qualitative information about, for instance, respondents’ attitudes to their roles, those aspects of their roles that they felt were positive and/or more frustrating, and challenges likely to be faced in achieving career aspirations, were used to begin plotting the key dimensions of Third Space, and to develop a topic guide for the interviews. Because of respondents’ availability, it was only possible to conduct ten interviews, five in each institution. These were people who had volunteered to be interviewed at the end of the electronic questionnaire, and were therefore self-selected.

To begin the process of analysis, descriptive codes were developed from the factual data collected in the questionnaire. Interpretive codes were then developed from the
responses to the more qualitative questions to identify possible latent meanings that could be explored further in the interviews. After the interviews, pattern codes were established that pointed to linking themes between the accounts.

**Analysis of findings**

As a first step, a list of factors describing the most positive, and more challenging, aspects of respondents’ roles was developed, and from this a number of attractors and detractors emerged (these are listed in order of perceived importance):

**Attractors**

- Working with a wide range of people, including academic staff.
- Undertaking research and development.
- Undertaking project work.
- Contributing to activity to which respondents were ideologically committed.
- Using one’s influence/expertise to ‘make a difference’.

**Detractors**

- Unnecessary procedures and bureaucracy.
- Relationships between professional and academic staff.
- Management issues including heavy workloads, lack of resources.
- Imposition of boundaries.
- Negative/uncooperative attitudes to joint working.

From this it might be concluded that the typical *Third Space* professional is primarily people- and project-oriented, even though they may work in a ‘mainstream’ area such as a faculty or academic department. Furthermore, the complexity of relationships between professional and academic staff is reflected in the fact that joint working was a source of both satisfaction and frustration.

The data also suggested that *Third Space* was not a unitary space, as might be suggested when thinking about it as a ‘singularity’ defined by the fact that it is neither professional nor academic. On the one hand, there may be areas of activity that are strongly influenced by existing “rules and resources” (Giddens, 1991), such as assumptions or precedents, inherited or transferred from either the professional or academic spheres. On the other hand, there may be areas where new “rules and resources” are developed to deal with different types of activity or situation, and in which new practices are openly acknowledged.

Three clearly identifiable processes emerged from the narratives, which were defined as *Contestation, Reconciliation* and *Reconstruction*. These were developed to provide a frame or model through which the dynamics of *Third Space* environments might be described and understood:

**Contestation process**
The Contestation process reflects challenges and tensions that typically arise from those working across professional and academic spheres of activity, including:

- Operational issues associated with process and bureaucracy.
- The speed of and timescales within which activity takes place, described by one manager as different “rhythms” between academic and more project-oriented approaches, geared to achieving outcomes.
- The contractual nature of work involving clients and partners, as opposed to the more open-ended nature of academic work.
- Political issues and negotiations.
- The nature of “Mode 2” research and consultancy activity in Third Space, referred to by two respondents as being regarded as “trade” or “dirty” work.

Individuals also displayed frustrations more usually associated with academic staff, for instance, what were seen as ‘management’ requirements (perceived as restrictions on autonomy and the ability to make decisions), and resource constraints (such as funding and time).

During the Contestation process, individuals define themselves according to what they see as the dominant “rules and resources”. In an academic environment, academic space is seen as the ‘default’ space. Staff who work in ‘professional’ space may feel that they are seen as outsiders, and even have a sense of disenfranchisement. They are likely, therefore, to find themselves negotiating their position. The following comments illustrate conditions of Contestation:

- “… academic colleagues [fail] to see value in what I do”.
- “My ideas have been taken away by [academic] managers and developed by them rather than by me”.
- “…academic staff have no interest in the area I am involved in”.
- “… [I am obliged to be] reactive to others rather than having autonomy to assume more proactive roles”.

Reflected in these comments is a sense of self as ‘the other’, and a lack of understanding on the part of academic colleagues about activity in Third Space, or of the challenges associated with it.

As a coping strategy during the Contestation process, individuals may privately contest inherited “rules and resources”, whilst abiding by them for pragmatic purposes. This can result in a process of “doublespeak” or “splitting”, which involves “living on the cusp, to deal with two contradictory things at the same time without either transcending or repressing that contradiction…” (Bhabha quoted in Mitchell, 1995: 5-6). In these dual conditions of acceptance and challenge approaches to and understandings of working practices are “interrogated and reinitiated” (Bhabha, 1994: 6). The following comments from the survey questionnaire reflect Kehm’s comment about the existence of “‘secret’ managers” (Kehm, 2006: 170), and Rhoades’ concept of an “invisible workforce” (Rhoades, 2010):

- “To be able to question assumptions and improve decision-making, you have to be in the room as the decisions are being made.”
- “… [the] contributions [of professional staff] are not always recognised and respected, or only after a lengthy period of building… trust”.

Furthermore, people who feel “invisible” may be obliged to adopt a persona to make progress with the tasks that they feel they are qualified to undertake.
“Splitting” is also demonstrated in the equivocation that occurs, for instance, around understandings of ‘service’ and ‘partnership’ between professional and academic staff, as well as around concepts of ‘management’ and ‘leadership’, and ways in which professional staff might be regarded as professionals in their own right. The process of Contestation, therefore, might be characterised as representing a state of perpetual tension, generating identity narratives that have “a double edge” (Bhabha, 1994: 13). It involves, at the same time, inherited assumptions about, and challenges to, structures of power and authority (such as Shelley’s “struggles over field boundaries” (Shelley, 2009: 20)). It might therefore be seen as being raw space, a testing ground for individuals and new forms of activity, on the cusp of legitimacy, but not yet fully recognised or acknowledged by their institution. But, because it is subject to inherited “rules and resources”, there may be sanctions if things go wrong. It can therefore be risky, because approaches are not fully acknowledged and new “rules and resources” are not yet established or internalised. Contested space, therefore, is susceptible to perturbation and uncertainty, although it remains vital to “the inter-animation of different voices at the heart of meaning-making”, of which “struggle, conflict and difference” are an essential part (Pryor and Crossouard, 2008). It might therefore be seen as the ‘darker’ side of Third Space. “Splitting” offers a coping strategy, and its dual conditions of both acceptance and challenge allow new spaces to emerge in the Reconciliation and Reconstruction processes, whereby approaches to and understandings of working practices and identities are “interrogated and reinitiated” (Bhabha, 1994: 6). The process of Contestation, therefore, is essential to “…dealing with or living with and through contradiction and then using that process for social agency” (Bhabha, quoted in Mitchell (1995: 6).

Reconciliation process

The Reconciliation process is underpinned by a belief in the possibility of:

- Collaboration between interested parties who can be persuaded that they have something to contribute to, and gain from, joint endeavour.
- Perceived added value such as a development or initiative that would not occur otherwise.
- Overarching aims to which participants feel ideologically committed, such as raising educational or employment aspirations, as well as material benefits such as improving market opportunity.

During the process of Reconciliation, difference is negotiated, so as to “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies… that initiate new states of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation…” (Bhabha, 1994: 1-2). In the case of the current study, “originary and initial subjectivities” could refer to working practices and approaches that originate from either professional or academic spheres. The Reconciliation process is therefore “a place of invention and transformational encounters, a dynamic in-between space that is imbued with… ambivalence, ambiguities and contradictions, with the feelings and practices of both sites, to fashion something different, unexpected” (Bhabha quoted in Moles, 2008: 4). It therefore enables new forms of activity to occur, for instance, for professional staff to undertake work from which they might otherwise be excluded, such as teaching students or institutional research and development.

Work in the Reconciliation process is characterised by comments about facilitating understandings and developments across different spheres of activity, such as:
“... giv[ing] voice to the student learner, whilst presenting findings to the relevant committees”.

“... work[ing] with a wide pool of colleagues from a wide geographical patch, making linkages across the network and being able to offer development opportunities”.

“... connect[ing] people together to solve problems and translate their different languages (technical, business, education); enabl[ing] them to meet their own challenges”.

During the Reconciliation process, new understandings are found by “learning how to conceptualise ‘contradiction’ or the dialectic as that state of being or thinking that is ‘neither the one nor the other, but something else besides’” (Bhabha, quoted in Mitchell, 1995: 9-10). This involves “cultural translation” (Bhabha, 1990: 211), to offer a safer, more permissive place for new activities and relationships. The Reconciliation process might, therefore, be said to be “a place of critical exchange where the… imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives… the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives” (Soja, 1996: 5). It is, therefore, a place where opportunities emerge, in relation to, for instance, institutional research and development, and new forms of relationship between teachers, learners and professional and academic staff.

Reconstruction process

Activities undertaken and identities formed during the Reconstruction process are no longer defined solely by “rules and resources” deriving from one or other “originary” spaces, but via the creation of a plural environment in Third Space. They are represented by comments such as:

• “Interaction with, and respect received from, academic colleagues on an equal intellectual footing”.

• “[Gaining] acceptance of project officer experiences as relevant background…”

• “I have a good deal of freedom to produce solutions appropriate to the situation and/or project”.

Throughout the process of Reconstruction, therefore, new “rules and resources” are created. In Bhabha’s terms, the space it offers “displace[s] the histories that constitute it, and set[s] up new structures of authority… which are inadequately understood through received wisdom… a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha, 1990). These might be represented by, for instance, recognition of a project within institutional structures via representation on a formal committee; by the creation of a new department or unit; or, at a system-wide level, by the development of a professional association or publication relating to a new form of activity, such as institutional research. In this sense new space is being created that is not defined solely by being ‘in-between’ professional and academic space.

Reconstruction, therefore, involves the active contribution of individuals to the formation of new, plural space. As shown in the case profiles below, they are, during this process, likely to develop new identities for themselves and their teams. This is reflected in comments such as:
• “… finding time to undertake a doctorate… required within higher education to be taken seriously”.
• “… there is always a tension between general management skills and craft-specific skills. I am studying for an MBA to improve the former and training at work for the latter”.

During the Reconstruction process, individuals are likely to develop networks that enable them to contextualise problems, integrate different threads of activity and thereby mitigate tension between different groupings. They therefore invest in “strong” ties, spending time on close and regular relationships with key individuals and networks, as well as taking advantage of the opportunities provided by “weak ties” via extended networks (Granovetter, 1973). They are also likely to be ideologically committed to the work they are doing, and to be motivated by that commitment, as illustrated in comments such as:
• “Moving forward an agenda I believe in”.
• “I’m working for an institution that can transform the world for the better”.

The construction of new forms of space may also be reflected in development of the language used to describe institutional activity, for instance an extension of the meaning of words such as ‘business’, ‘partnership’, ‘outreach’ and ‘community’, and a spreading of understandings about these. General concepts such as ‘capital building’, ‘networking’, and ‘creativity’, which permeate the ‘boundary-crossing’ literature, may also be adopted (for instance, Dowd and Kaplan, 2005; Williams, 2002; Zeichner, 2008).

Two case profiles

Two case profiles, drawn from different institutions, illustrate the processes of Contestation, Reconciliation and Reconstruction at work. One, the Media Developer, represents Learning and Programme Support, and the other, the Employability Manager, represents Community and Business Partnership.

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The Media Developer (representing Learning and Programme Support)
This individual had a technical background with skills in software and media development and experience in industry. Their key area of responsibility was in the development of learning materials and, to that end, training others in their use. Although responsible for programme delivery, they demonstrated how an ability to translate and interpret academic concerns and objectives was of paramount importance in aligning content with appropriate delivery mechanisms.

Contestation
The Media Developer illustrated two key aspects of the Contestation process, firstly, that there is likely to be more than one ‘language’ being spoken in any institution. Thus: “I hear one thing [from the Vice-Chancellor] about the way we’re trying to move the organisation forward… but I see the management decisions tak[en] around me that seem to be contradicting what I’ve just heard the Vice-Chancellor say… you’ve got two different groups of people often talking two different languages”. These languages expressed different preoccupations and concerns, for instance, in relation to the way that learning outcomes might be achieved so as to meet both academic and institutional objectives. This manager had actively engaged in a
learning process so that they could understand and translate between these different languages. Secondly, they did not allow themselves to be bound by organisational or structural hierarchies in developing a relationship with colleagues whose support they needed to enlist: “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…” They therefore took the initiative in entering fora that might be uncomfortable or challenging in order to progress the debate about the opportunities offered by technology, both to learning and teaching and to institutional strategy.

Reconciliation

While acknowledging that they provided a service, the Media Developer saw themselves as an “equal partner” among teaching and learning “thought leaders” and senior managers who developed the university’s e-learning strategy. Thus, they effectively acted as an internal consultant, advising programme teams and contextualising problems within a wider framework: “you don’t optimise the problem where it is, you try and optimise it within the system in which it occurs…” They were, therefore, not simply interpreting and translating, but articulating problems in new ways: “Sometimes just me going in as a ‘third eye’... is all that’s needed…” They therefore acted as a catalyst by having “the confidence to challenge”, which enabled programme teams to come to their own accommodation and resolution of problems. Thus, they facilitated a process whereby “... you combine multiple views of the same situation [so] that you are able to understand the whole picture and identify those areas that are important.”

Reconstruction

In finding a way of working round and across organisational structures and encouraging others to do the same, the Media Developer saw their role as: “... helping to knock down silos... standing on them once they’re knocked down and trying to encourage people to build bridges rather than silos”. In this situation, relationships rather than structures became the critical factor: “if you get the relationships right, everything else falls into place”. It also involved raising aspirations and confidence levels of both academic and professional groupings in gaining familiarity with each others’ fields, and challenging them to develop new skills and competencies rather than becoming defensive about existing ones: “... you need to be able to give people the opportunities... to actually move into new areas... to move the thinking forward...” This person was therefore trying to achieve congruence between innovation, the professional development of individuals, and the development of the institution, relating the somewhat messy nature of activity in Third Space to both academic and institutional purposes: “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?

The Employability Manager (representing Community and Business Partnership)

This manager had a background in staff development and training across the public sector. Their key responsibility was to improve the graduate employment outcomes of an inner city university catering for the mass market, to raise the aspirations of students, and to develop positive relationships with local employers in preparing students for work. Because of a lack of resources, they sought sponsorship from the private sector in the form of, for instance, student placements and training opportunities. At the same time they worked with academic colleagues in raising both educational and employment aspirations.
Contestation

The Employability Manager found that they were obliged to overcome deep-rooted beliefs within the university, and among the students themselves, that its students were not high achievers, and that, therefore, “the odds are against us”. As a result, the university’s employment record had been poor, with few initiatives being taken to improve perceptions of their students by employers. Thus, “The first thing I had to do was have a belief [in student potentials]... I’ve got to be ambitious [for them]... as long as that’s there, there will always be opportunities”. Furthermore, in talking to employers, this manager undertook a proactive approach to overcoming potential resistance: “it’s no use me saying ‘we’re at the bottom of the league table, and... our students haven’t got [the highest grades]...’ On the whole I always get something from [employers]”. There was also an element of uncertainty in that their credibility depended on achieving outcomes that would raise confidence levels in the institution, students and employers, and reinforce the possibility of future success.

Reconciliation

Starting from the premise that qualifications were only one element in a student’s employability, the Employability Manager offered programmes of transferable skills, such as creating a cv and giving presentations. They also contributed to appropriate modules in the undergraduate curriculum, integrating understandings of employability into mainstream activity: “we... do... development work with [academic staff] in terms of their own practice, linking with the modules, and [helping students to] understand what employers are looking for”. This manager, therefore, was able to use their hinterland of experience in other sectors to re-fashion attitudes and approaches to careers and employability in their institution. The work of their team fed back into the teaching and research profile of the university including, for instance, “Mode 2” institutional research into employability issues.

Reconstruction

By refusing to be constrained by existing boundaries, in this case attitudes and beliefs, this manager was not only able to establish new space that crossed conventional parameters, but also to move the institution forward. Furthermore, within this space, the manager was seeking to replicate the ‘real world’ of work. For instance, all opportunities were offered on a competitive basis, and the Employability Manager assisted employers by providing appropriate shortlists. At the same time, all applicants, successful and unsuccessful, were offered formative feedback that would help them in the future, so that every initiative became a learning opportunity. The Employability Manager also saw themselves as leading by example, describing their career as a “steep learning journey” in which they “offered people places that they wouldn’t normally go to”. They inculcated an ethos of ‘self-help’ in their team, by giving them challenging projects, and this fostered a sense of partnership between the team, academic colleagues and employer representatives.

The managers in the case examples displayed an ability to hold both professional and academic worldviews in their grasp, tolerating a significant degree of ambiguity, uncertainty and even risk. They enlisted academic colleagues in service of broadly based institutional projects, and there was also a sense of learning and personal growth as they went along, both for themselves and for their teams. Through their own agency, they created new forms of space, rather than simply subscribing to given structures, organisation charts or job descriptions. They developed knowledge from the application of practice, institutional research, and relationships with partners, and integrated understandings drawn from these. Furthermore, they were willing to challenge the status quo and built non-positional authority, for instance by acting as...
an ‘internal consultant’ and progressing best practice. Thus, individuals who were able to work through the three processes of identity construction might be said to exemplify the concept of identity as a “project” rather than as a fixed sense of belonging to either academic or professional spheres (Giddens, 1991; Henkel, 2000), working in conditions of “weak boundary maintenance” in relation to their occupation of plural space, and the knowledge that they construct (Bernstein, 1970: 61). Their ability to negotiate new “rules and resources” and relationships reflects Habermas’ concept of “communicative action”, that is “oriented to reaching understanding … on the basis of common situation definitions … ” (Habermas, 1984: 286).

Towards ‘collaborative’ management and leadership?

The concept of ‘management’ as applied to higher education continues to be a contested one, and the term “managerialism” has gained currency in reflecting a sense that universities have become too pliant in responding to government policy that is driven by both market imperatives and accountability processes. This has fostered the separation and even polarisation of academic and management activity. However, as suggested by Whitchurch and Gordon (2010), new understandings are required about what ‘management’ might mean in the contemporary university, especially in distributed arrangements across schools and faculties, research and project teams. For instance, Watson (2009) sees higher education as comprising a network of psychological contracts with different groups and stakeholders. Similarly, Barnett (2000) visualized institutions as mosaics, constructed from the totality of the parts, suggesting that ‘management’ involves facilitation of each inter-connecting part (or set of psychological contracts) to achieve coherent sets of activity and outcomes. It therefore seemed appropriate to review the concept of ‘management’ in the context of Third Space environments, to progress understanding of how it is interpreted and represented by those with mixed and project-oriented portfolios of activity.

One respondent described what appeared to be a common situation for Third Space professionals:

“It was obvious that the academic did not want to lead the team, and the head of the unit didn’t feel it was an appropriate role for him, so after some negotiation we agreed that I would manage and lead the team, although I wasn’t allowed to be called Team Leader, I was only allowed to be called Team Manager”.

This illustrates three key points: the tendency for management responsibilities to be conferred by default, because ‘management’ per se is not necessarily seen as being an attractive option; issues around recognition accorded to the role; and the fact that ‘leadership’ tends to be more valued (and by implication is more difficult) than ‘management’. Thus, ‘management’ was described as “ensuring that the activities you’re responsible for are delivered on time and to budget” and avoiding “project drift”. There was some reluctance by respondents to perceive themselves as ‘managers’, so that ‘management’ was an aspect of their roles that was, by and large, downplayed, although there might be occasions when they had to move into that role in order to achieve an outcome:

“I find I draw on my experience in research, because I have been responsible for commissioning and developing studies, and I do tend to get quite involved in the analysis and the outcomes of that research, which sometimes I feel I may be taking it a bit too far because at the end of the day I should be
managing or overseeing a project… so I will usually stop myself going too far… sometimes you have to… become much more the manager than anything else”.

One respondent who organised student ambassador programmes reported a similar experience:

“sometimes student ambassadors are brilliant, but sometimes we give them so much leeway that they come back to us about stuff, and it’s like, hold on a minute, you have to remember we’re your boss basically”.

Another respondent reflected a clear pragmatism that dictated when what might be termed ‘management moments’ were needed:

“I think there does have to be a bit of management sometimes when you need to get things done”.

In a similar vein, another described themselves as primarily “consensual”, but “autocratic” when the occasion demanded it.

There was a sense in which leadership was favoured as being intrinsically more creative and generous than management, and therefore more empowering. Thus, “managing is to ensure that it gets done… leading is to ensure that the team do it to a high standard, and actually do it… willingly”. As one respondent put it, “it comes down to a kind of passion… if you genuinely believe that a particular something is going to be the best way to go, then that can fire you up to lead on that particular initiative”. Leadership skills could, nevertheless, be honed via management experience:

“I think if you’ve worked in a number of challenging situations as a manager, you can then develop out of that real leadership skills because it’s the way you’ve managed yourself out of whatever challenges you’ve been presented with…”

Leadership was also more forward looking, representing an investment in others so that they could make appropriate decisions, rather than trying to micro-manage outcomes:

• “I don’t want to make any decisions for [colleagues] whatsoever, but I want them to make the right decisions every time”.
• “I’ve got a great team of motivated staff and… trying to give them enough complex and interesting work to do is a problem rather than the other way round…”
• “I enjoy seeing people… develop, and I’ve got one or two members of my team who I can see… growing… [and] doing things that they wouldn’t have dared to do a year ago…”

If successful, this process could result in a cascade effect whereby leadership was spread downwards and across the institution, rather than occurring solely at the most senior levels. Thus:

• “I have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and to ensure that my staff get satisfaction from their work and fulfil a similar function for the staff they work with”.
• “… you [need to] get away from that hierarchical organisation where knowledge and decisions are taken at the top and filtered down, and you need to re-distribute that decision making and sell it at the appropriate level… decisions should be taken where the knowledge resides”. 
The sense of filling a gap or void was something that recurred in the narratives. This could be for very practical reasons, for instance professional staff offering taster sessions for local school pupils because it was difficult to persuade academic staff to perform this role. A more complex example is illustrated by a case in which two faculties, both containing their own “separate factions”, were merging, and asked their learning support team to build a website that would provide an identity for the newly merged faculty:

“… they wanted us to come in, provide a website that would then bring the whole thing together and… the faculty would then operate as one. So they were expecting us to manage the faculty, [and] to manage their own relationships…”

Because of a management void across the two faculties, professional colleagues provided a bridging function, in which “the skill that’s required… is the interpretation, the ability to network, forming relationships, understanding what’s going on and interpreting both directions for senior managers and yourself”, even though “that’s never something that’s… acknowledged”. ‘Management’ in this type of scenario involved being able to promote a situation whereby colleagues would “be able to understand how what they were doing fitted in with what everybody else was doing, and being willing to make some compromises”. One way of achieving this was to ask appropriate questions that enabled clients (be they academic colleagues, students or external partners) to come to their own conclusions about the application of specialist advice or expertise to their local problems. This form of ‘management’ was largely collaborative, involving what one respondent described as “… that difficult thing where you have to manage colleagues outside of line management authority”. The lack of direct leverage inherent in this type of management, particularly in relation to rewards and incentives and career paths, was a challenge.

Respondents described different ways of overcoming such lack of leverage, ranging from “coaxing and cajoling” to incentives such as withholding funding until completion of a project, all of which involved various “negotiations and trade offs”. Others used standard risk assessment procedures or service level agreements to apply sanctions. However, recourse to positional authority was regarded as a last resort:

“I think very, very rarely would we want to go to someone’s line manager, because I think that’s often a sign of failure when you do that”.

One individual described how they tried to pre-empt potential difficulties by developing a network of people who had a record of successful collaboration:

“… it’s almost like a little internal black book that you have which says well ‘I know that this person will be up for this… with a bit of persuasion and a bit of money…’ You have to find people who want to deliver”.

The principle of voluntarism in Third Space, therefore, emerged as a strong one, in that if participation in a project was obligatory, it was less likely to lead to quality outcomes. As one respondent put it, “conscripts make bad labour”. Where necessary pressure could be applied via members of a project advisory board, rather than a line manager. Peer pressure between team members could also be brought to bear.

Management and leadership in non-hierarchical, Third Space environments, therefore, might be described as existing on a ‘by exception’ basis, characterised for the most part by a collaborative approach that both enables and empowers team members. Nevertheless, guidance is necessary to give direction at critical points when a change of course or corrective action is required. A key element in this ‘lumpy’ form of
management is knowing and recognising these critical points. It is therefore, informed less by structural requirements than by contextual variables and relationships. There was the sense that rather than simply “telling people what to do”, there was a continuum of problem solving, management, partnership and leadership. This involved working with project teams, academic colleagues, external partners and consultants, with a focus on relationships as much as on other resources such as budgets or facilities. It also involved pooling expertise, whether technical, academic and professional, with that of a range of colleagues, including those who were more junior. To quote another respondent, who aimed to create a “high trust, high performance” culture, “you have to teach yourself to be very secure”. Although formal programmes of management and leadership development could be useful (though did not appear to be particularly widespread for those working in Third Space), it was felt that these needed to be combined with, and related to, on-the-ground experience for maximum effect.

Implications for individuals

While the possibilities provided for professional growth during Reconstruction appear to mitigate some of the frustrations that characterise Contestation, the Reconciliation and Reconstitution processes would be unlikely to be achieved without the challenges of Contestation being addressed. In practice, the three processes are not mutually exclusive, and are likely to occur in parallel, as working practices mature and gain legitimacy. Furthermore, individuals may be more closely aligned with one or other of the three processes at any one time, or display the characteristics of more than one, according to circumstances or the stage of their career. This may shed some light on the fact that there was evidence among respondents of both ideological commitment to, and some frustration with, Third Space environments. Those who felt frustration might well have been involved in processes of Contestation at the time.

Some people may regard a Third Space environment as one destination among others, in which they work for the time being, as suggested by the following comment: “I have a PhD. Currently higher education does not support people like me – there is a conflict between publishing papers and making systems benefit communities… It is hard for people like me to stay in higher education.” Such individuals might be termed ‘tourists’, using their stay as an exploratory or learning process, and occupying roles that are time limited, such as an internal consultant for a special project. There was some evidence that these people would be more likely to be involved in the Contestation process, rather than investing in new forms of activity, but a larger study would be required to explore the extent of this. Because they are able to accommodate a degree of open-endedness, uncertainty and even risk, this enables them to be relatively un-phased by Contestation.

Some individuals may prefer to focus on the people aspects of their work, working with different groups, interpreting between them and negotiating solutions as part of the Reconciliation process. Others may be involved in all three processes and might be characterised as ‘permanent residents’ who create new forms of space to which they have a sense of belonging. They are therefore more likely to become involved in the Reconstruction process, and to be able to cope both with being ‘an other’ in relation to academic staff, and of being professionals in their own right. They are more likely than ‘tourists’ to make a career in Third Space, contributing to the
establishment and development of new forms of territory that may in future become mainstream. Nevertheless, the Reconciliation and Reconstruction processes depend on an ability to recognise and work with the tensions and ambiguities in the Contestation process, and any one individual may, at different times and in different places, display the characteristics of both a ‘tourist’ and a ‘permanent resident’. Individuals working in Third Space, therefore, may wish to consider how they might be located vis-à-vis the processes of Contestation, Reconciliation and Reconstruction, and how these might work for them.

The study also demonstrates that Third Space working involves the individual in significant agency in achieving outcomes for their institution, and in developing their own careers. Not only are job descriptions likely to be subject to interpretation, but institutional structures, processes and relationships are likely to be critiqued and redefined on an ongoing basis. Although respondents experienced frustration, they also demonstrated energy towards and belief in what they were trying to achieve. The word “passion” recurred. Thus there would appear to be intrinsic motivators and rewards within Third Space itself, as illustrated by the following comments:

- “This is an enjoyable place to work… you come across an incredibly varied group of individuals which makes it… an incredibly vibrant place to work most of the time”.
- “If anything I feel more valued in the Third Space than in my normal role, because the people in my normal role don’t see the value of what I’m doing in Third Space”.

The challenge for those who were “passionate” about and deeply involved in what they did was to locate their work in wider policy environments. Thus, one respondent said that they were “politically hungry” to “broaden my horizons” and take their work to another level, regionally and nationally. They confessed to feeling isolated within their specific project and needing more contact with “like-minded people”. Another, newly-recruited, respondent gave the impression of lacking support and guidance in relation to some of the decisions that they were expected to make.

Thus, Third Space working, while providing opportunities for those who seek them, has its challenges, and would appear to require a degree of experience within or outside higher education in order for judgements to be made about how boundaries might be pushed or redefined, the potential for new working space to be created, and the costs and benefits that might be associated with this, both personally and institutionally. A more experienced respondent saw the development of networks as a key factor, finding mechanisms to “flush out” individuals that they could work with, such as all-staff emails with an invitation to become involved in a specific project, because “I’m never going to know everybody in an institution”. This could then become the basis of a new network and source of social capital.

There were also issues about the status of boundary work. As roles don’t always fit organisational categories there may be concern about gaining recognition and credit for work that is not reflected precisely in a job description. For instance, one respondent suggested that:

“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”.
This can be exacerbated by the fact that organisational structures tend not to give visibility or profile to people working in Third Space. There may therefore also be concerns about getting out of the mainstream, for instance how to gain experience of staff or budget management. Furthermore, career paths or development opportunities are less clear, placing the onus on the individual to make their own decisions in building a portfolio of expertise and experience.

**Implications for institutions**

A major issue for institutions is the way that Third Space might be incorporated organisationally, in particular its relationship with ‘mainstream’ space, so that it contributes to and enriches overall institutional aspirations and working practices, as opposed to generating a new boundary between the two. The narratives suggest that achieving this requires active attention on the part of institutions:

“… in moving beyond knowledge organisations to conceptual organisations, you need to be able to give people opportunities… to move into new areas without actually knowing what the benefits would be.”

The idea of a “conceptual” organisation suggests a fluid and thinking institution that values ideas about future developments as well as the accumulation of knowledge that has been tried and tested:

“How do you convince people that the knowledge that you have, which is also novel, is actually of long term value?”

One respondent suggested that Third Space working involved a degree of “altruism” in allowing people to be “evangelical”. This is likely to require belief on the part of both institutions and individuals in future possibilities, and the theme of ‘moving the thinking forward’ was one that recurred.

Nevertheless, more flexible approaches also raise the question of how top-down commitment to innovation and creativity might be achieved at the same time as maintaining oversight so as to, to quote one respondent, “maintain standards without stifling innovation”. This may involve recognition that people on the ground may be ahead of institutional strategy, and also the inclusion of a wider spectrum of staff in debates, even if this challenges the status quo. As another respondent suggested:

“Until you value dissent you’re not going to be making good decisions”. This raises issues about how a range of views might be accommodated and used to effect, rather than individuals necessarily being perceived (or feeling that they are perceived) as being ‘in opposition’. As one respondent commented, “… once someone is seen as a dissenter, how does an organisation deal with them?”

Although it was not possible to draw broad comparisons about the nature of Third Space across pre-1992 and post-1992 sectors on the basis of a sample of two institutions, evidence of the three processes of Contestation, Reconciliation and Reconstruction, and the struggle associated with realising potentials, were found in both. However, in pre-92 particularly, there was evidence of both an attachment to, and frustration with, the structures that existed. Although in one sense individuals wanted to be ‘set free’ from these, there was concern about managing the freedom that this would imply, and this may be a response to Third Space working that is more widely generalisable. There was also evidence of ‘patches’ of Third Space in mainstream areas such as faculties, and in these there was some frustration about not being able to develop new spaces and activities. This also raises the question of how a
patch of *Third Space* relates to surrounding mainstream activity, and the nature of that interface. As one respondent commented:

“I’ve managed to keep some research going [into their functional area] but there was nowhere to take that skill set because the unit wasn’t willing to support that team any longer”.

One way in which *Third Space* potentials might be enhanced in this type of situation is by the development of wider networks of like-minded individuals:

“…what’s happened for a lot of people is that they’ve formed their own networks. I certainly have a group of colleagues with a similar range and level of experience as myself and we support… each other, and also… new colleagues coming in.”

Such networks are also based on acknowledgement that, in complex organisations and sectors, “you have to know other people and be able to call on expertise or just to ask questions, you can’t possibly know everything”. These types of ‘self-help’ networks also prevent ‘patches’ of *Third Space* from, in turn, becoming silos. This reinforces the sense of ‘voluntarism’ as an essential element of *Third Space* activity. Furthermore, the parameters of *Third Space* are not fixed, and the shape of activity may change as higher education institutions take on new projects and areas of interest, to reflect what one respondent referred to as “continually shifting networks”. Thus, *Third Space*, whether it exists by design or default, might be seen as an opportunity for institutional renewal, allowing the institution to change shape like an amoeba and re-form over time.

One area that emerged as requiring more attention, in the form of briefings, training and experience, was working with external consultants. This appeared to be different from other forms of external partnership, which were more likely to be based on perceptions of mutual benefit. For instance, one person reported that they had to overcome the feeling of being “dictated to” by representatives of a firm of management consultants. The use of external consultants may or may not be a feature of higher education that increases, but ways in which they are accommodated may be something that institutions wish to consider further, perhaps in the context of staff who work as ‘internal consultants’ on special projects for a time limited period.

Institutional responses to *Third Space* working and, in practice, the response of managers of departments and functional units, may vary from active encouragement to allowing it to evolve by default. Institutions may wish, therefore, to consider whether and how *Third Space* might exist for them, and what might be the conditions and variables that affect this. These might include, for instance:

- Staffing profile (background, length of service, experience, networks, qualifications).
- The nature of individual projects (balance of activity, number of partners, maturity of partnership, extent of “strong” and “weak” ties).
- Institution/sub-institution mission, aspirations, niche market.

Issues arising from the study suggest that institutions may also wish to review:

- How to achieve ‘joined up management’ between *Third Space* and mainstream activities, and also between project teams and senior institutional managers.
• The development of ‘mature’ relationships via the processes of Contestation, Reconciliation and Reconstruction, which may supplement formal reporting lines.
• Recognition of ‘management’ as being an enabling rather than a controlling process, allowing decisions to be made closest to the point of action.
• Use of Third Space as an opportunity to offer career development opportunities and to assist individuals to move beyond “silos” (Shine, 2010), possibly via a system of secondments.
• The creation of job descriptions that facilitate mobility and role enhancement.
• Use of rewards and incentives (not necessarily financial) for Third Space activity, such as responsibility allowances, eligibility for special awards, and professional development opportunities.
• Inclusion in workload models and promotion criteria of, for instance, partnership building, consultancy and research and development activity.
• Use of attachments and associateships to recognise academically-oriented activity, for instance to an institutional centre for teaching and learning or higher education studies.
• Recognition that for some individuals the lack of structure and clear parameters in Third Space may be uncomfortable, and even cause anxiety.
• The use of a mentoring or coaching system for people who are less confident in Third Space environments.

Reference to this checklist might be made in preparing institutional and sub-institutional plans and in staff review and development processes. In relation to the latter, it might be that Strike’s “Career Climbing Frame” (Strike, 2010: 88), allowing a range of different career routes with crossover between them, could be adapted for professional staff to take account of concerns that, for instance: “… the university isn’t helping us to progress and isn’t getting the best from us because it’s not clear as to where we go and what we do next”.

Outcomes achieved

Outcomes include:

• A review of the literature on Third Space as a concept.
• The application of theories of “third space” to contemporary higher education, and as the context for the emergence of new forms of identity.
• The creation of a framework to illuminate Third Space working practices via the concepts of Contestation, Reconciliation and Reconstruction.
• A review of the implications of Third Space for individuals and institutions.
• A conference presentation at the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers on 10-12 September 2009 on “Some Implications of ‘Public/Private Space’ for Professional Identities in Higher Education”.
• The establishment of a website on the Open University Knowledge Network site: http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/workspace.cfm?wpid=8930. As an adjunct to
this, it is proposed to develop an online network of staff working in Third Space.

During the period of the project Whitchurch conducted the following plenary and training sessions, which referred to the ongoing work of the study. Not only did these sessions enable dissemination to occur, but it was possible to obtain feedback during the life of the project:

- ESCALATE, University of East London. 16 February 2009 (for widening participation professionals).
- Seminar at Kingston University. 24 March 2009 (research seminar for higher education studies group).
- LFHE Future Leaders Programme. Cambridge 1 July 2009 (for library and IS staff).
- Association of University Administrators Yorkshire Regional Conference. Sheffield. 5 November 2009.

Further sessions are scheduled for:

- University of Oxford.
  - Developing Leadership and Management Practice programme for university administrators. 7 May 2010.

Whitchurch has also been in invited to present a paper at an International Workshop on The Professionalization of Higher Education Management? Comparative Perspectives on University Leadership and Administration to be held at the German Research Institute for Publication Administration, Speyer, Germany. Future conference attendances planned are European Association of Institutional Research in Valencia, September 2010, and the Society for Research into Higher Education in December 2010.

Evaluation of the project against the project aims and objectives

The aims and objectives of the project were:
“To achieve a more nuanced understanding of the topology of a diversifying professional landscape, and to propose organisational and work practices that will optimise the contribution of staff working in Third Space, including:

- The characteristics of Third Space, and the potentials it offers.
- The aspirations of staff working in this space.
- The nature of the work undertaken, and relationships formed, within it.
- Challenges arising, and how they might be addressed.
- Management and leadership within this space, including, for instance, rewards and incentives, career progression, and professional development opportunities.”

The project focused on two case institutions in order to achieve a more detailed analysis of Third Space as an environment than had been possible in Whitchurch’s earlier research report for the Leadership Foundation (2008), which focused rather on the roles and identities of individuals. The current study has begun to describe the complex dimensions of Third Space as an emergent space in its own right, the dynamic nature of the processes involved in working there, and the nature of management and leadership associated with more project-oriented forms of activity. Via an electronic questionnaire and ten interviews it has achieved a sense of the challenges faced by individuals in their relationships with their colleagues and institutions, and in their careers, and ways in which they manage these. Suggestions have been made as to ways in which individuals and institutions might optimise Third Space, for instance by the development of new forms of recognition and reward. The study also points to ways in which individuals might move beyond the concept of organisational “silos”, and the constraints perceived to be imposed by them (Shine, 2010).

**An analysis of the benefits of the project**

The concept of Third Space has been applied to higher education institutional environments to illustrate “another mode of thinking about space that draws upon… traditional dualism, but extends well beyond [it] in scope, substance and meaning” (Soja, 1996:11). Insights have thereby been developed into ways in which it is possible to move beyond narratives of ‘exclusion’ as they have been applied to both academic and professional groupings. Working practices and identities have been brought into view that have, hitherto, been hidden as a result of ‘binary’ understandings of higher education environments, such as ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’, ‘generalist’ and ‘specialist’, ‘management’ and ‘administration’. By developing the concepts of Contestation, Reconciliation and Reconstruction, the study has progressed understandings of roles and relationships in Third Space, including the creation of new spaces and identities. It offers a model for institutions to use in reviewing organisational structures and cultures, and for individuals in considering their professional and career development. This model incorporates a sense of resistance and struggle, via the Contestation process, as a legitimate part of identity construction and working practice. It therefore offers a way of acknowledging the more challenging aspects of Third Space, at the same time as those that are more developmental and creative, providing a tool for understanding increasingly complex relationships and working practices. It also offers a means by which over-
simplification, for instance whereby cross boundary working is invariably seen a ‘good thing’, might be avoided.

By acknowledging the ‘darker’ side of Third Space, the study also avoids what are might be seen as idealised accounts of boundary crossing in relation to activities such as networking and the building of effective relationships (for instance, Williams, 2002: 121). It demonstrates that a greater emphasis on relationships than on organisational structures can reduce checks and balances and leave some staff, particularly those who are less experienced, feeling vulnerable. Feedback from the EDUHUB conference also suggested that there is also a sense in which Third Space could become all things to all people, or a default position for people who feel that they do not ‘fit’ the formal structures, for whatever reason, possibly with a hint of the ‘subversive’. It could also foster a sense of a lack of identity if moving from project to project as a ‘project manager’, especially in an individual does not have a title that links them into established institutional structures. Nevertheless, the narratives of respondents in the study showed that although the ambiguity of Third Space environments presented some challenges, these could also be used to advantage. For instance, specific projects could be presented as having a close association with the parent institution, or at one remove, as appropriate for the immediate purpose. Third Space could also be used to trial or evaluate new activities before they were formally launched, for instance new forms of access programme.

The study points to implications of Third Space for both individuals and institutions, and suggests that optimising the potentials of those working in it is likely to be a joint process, with responsibility on institutions to recognise and respond to changes that are occurring, and an onus on individuals to ‘educate’ their institutions about how Third Space might be used most advantageously. This is reflected in the comments of one respondent working in learning support that:

“… one of the main constraints is history, that there is that established relationship [between professional and academic staff], and getting people to understand that the relationship that existed in the past isn’t [necessarily] going to be useful in the future is perhaps one of the main challenges that we need to address… there needs to be changes on both sides… academics need to… allow others to make decisions about certain aspects of the way learning is delivered, because they won’t have all the knowledge needed to deliver that learning experience. And at the same time I think that [professional] staff will need to acquire more confidence that they do have a role to play in answering those questions”.

Furthermore, this illustrates the fact that Third Space is unlikely to occur simply by institutions ‘designing it in’, and depends on a combination of approaches. It was significant that a number of respondents remarked upon the difference that the approach of a line manager could make. A practical change such as a new line manager could in practice have a major impact on what an individual could achieve.

Moreover, although Third Space working has implications for the relationship between institutions and their staff, this does not necessarily mean a major shift in approach. It may, rather, be a question of being creative within existing mechanisms, so as to give credit for new forms of activity (Whitchurch and Gordon, 2010, forthcoming). For instance, Third Space activity can be supported by more flexible employment packages for individuals who occupy a broader range of roles than
hitherto, and develop careers that do not follow a traditional academic or professional pattern. What seems clear, however, is that relationships rather than structures are at the heart of the way that Third Space works for both individuals and institutions. Individuals and institutions, therefore, may wish to review the concept of Third Space, and the processes associated with it, and ways in which they might make it work for them.

The timeliness of the project, and recognition that there are increasing implications of Third Space working, is illustrated by the number of invitations received by Whitchurch to provide plenary and training sessions for professional staff (including professional managers, library staff, and educational technologists), as noted in the section on Outcomes achieved, above. The project, therefore, appears to have been recognised as contributing to understandings of working practices that do not fit traditional frameworks, and about which there is little data. Raising awareness of Third Space may help its potentials to be realised more effectively than allowing these to occur by chance. Moreover, the project has provided a platform for further research to be undertaken, for instance on the impact over time of Third Space on academic, as well as professional roles, identities and careers.

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References


APPENDIX A