



Article type

Full paper, double-blind peer review.

Publication history

Received: 28 June 2021. Revised: 09 December 2021.
Accepted: 13 December 2021. Online: 06 June 2022.

Cover image

Caryn Sandoval
via Unsplash.



Special issue Autoethnography in online doctoral education | **More at** <https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.9415e58d>

Lost in third space: Identity work of a “blended professional” in higher education

Regina Obexer

Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom

Keywords

professional identity; Third Space;
blended professionals; autoethnography; higher education

Citation

Obexer, R. (2022). Lost in third space: Identity work of a higher education “blended professional.” *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*, 2(3), 467-483.

<https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.14771617>

Abstract

This autoethnographic study addresses the salient issue of the fluid professional identity experienced by an increasing number of employees in the continually changing context of higher education. Using the concept of the “Blended Professional in the Third Space” (Whitchurch, 2008, 2012) as a basis, the author explores the aspects influencing her identity as a higher education professional situated in a hybrid and constantly changing space between academic and professional roles. Drawing on the author’s own experience and reflections as an empirical basis, the study investigates how a blended professional deals with inhabiting this hybrid space, what issues she encounters, what opportunities she sees, and how all this impacts her sense of self and the way she constructs her professional identity.

1. Introduction

This autoethnographic study explores my ongoing identity work as a senior lecturer, eLearning specialist, and coordinator of responsible management education at a small university in Austria. Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research in which the author uses self-reflective writing and other personal data to explore and interpret (often challenging) life-experiences, to critically analyse these, and to

connect them with a wider socio-cultural context (Chang, 2008). I have chosen this approach as an appropriate method to reflect on the identity struggles I encounter in my role and to analyse these within a broader context of identity issues in the Higher Education workplace.

As a professional who has spent all her working life in higher education (HE) at four institutions on two continents, dealing with multiple roles, responsibilities and relationships is nothing new for me. However, navigating my current role has raised intensified feelings of uncertainty around my professional self, around my place in the institution, and around my career trajectory. I seem to have lost a stable sense of belonging, of who I am in my current role, and who I want to be in the future in a professional sense. In this study, I will explore the reasons for this crisis of professional identity.

I am not alone in experiencing this “ontological uncertainty” (Hunter, 2020) and the difficulties of creating a stable sense of professional self. A growing body of literature documents the identity struggles of HE staff in the face of massive changes due to both external and internal pressures on HE institutions (Henkel, 2010; Calvert et al., 2012). The impact of these changes on academic staff identities has been discussed widely (Knights & Clarke, 2014; McFarlane, 2011; Hunter 2020). There has, however, been less focus on the identity issues experienced by professional staff situated in the growing, but still ambiguous and hybrid space between academic and administrative roles, an area also termed “Third Space” (Whitchurch, 2008). This autoethnographic study focuses on my experience of being an inhabitant of this “Third Space” (Whitchurch, 2008) and can thus be seen as part of my “identity project” (Giddens, 1991), i.e. of the ongoing effort to make sense of myself through a meaningful narrative.

Having a sense of who we are, and as a consequence, how we should act, is a basic human need and a prerequisite for our interaction with others and the world (Giddens, 1991). Giddens (1991) argues that whilst pre-modern and modern notions of identity were seen as a given, often based around seemingly fixed aspects such as gender, class, family, locality, etc., this seemingly stable notion of identity was disrupted significantly during late modernism, which saw a transformation of the understanding of self from a fixed concept towards an ongoing task. Identity becomes a “reflexive project” of continually constructing and maintaining a “Narrative of Self”, i.e. a coherent story that helps us make sense of our lives. Identity thus morphs from a rigid, pre-established and non-negotiable concept to one that is flexible, multi-dimensional, and forever evolving. It requires work. Similarly, Jenkins (2004) defines identity as “a

process – identification – not a thing. It is not something that one can have – or not; it is something one does” (p.5).

This study can be seen as an integral part of my active, self-reflective identity work as a HE professional. It is guided by the following research question:

- How do I construct and navigate my professional identity as a HE blended professional in Third Space?

The following sections explore and answer this research question in several stages. First of all, a review of the recent literature provides a discussion of the factors impacting on identity formation of HE employees. Section 3 discusses the concept and context of “blended professionals in the Third Space” (Whitchurch, 2008, 2012), which serves as a theoretical framework and provides the basis for analysis, followed by an explanation of the methodological approach, the data sources and ethical implications. Section 4 describes my development as a blended professional, followed by a deconstruction of the different facets of my professional identity in my current roles in Section 5, which includes an analysis of the multiple aspects that influence my identity work. By establishing challenges and opportunities in Sections 6, I strive to re-construct my professional self through the narrative process. In conclusion, I discuss the implications of my own exploration and analysis for a better understanding of the aspects that allow blended professionals to construct a meaningful narrative of their professional selves within the complexities of working in contemporary HE institutions.

2. Literature review

In the globalised, uncertain, complex world of the 21st century, where identities have become fragile, fractured, multiple, and precarious, constructing a stable sense of self is not an easy undertaking. At the same time, identity work becomes more significant when we find ourselves in circumstances that are in constant flux (Bauman, 2001). As our environment and context change, so do the relationships, accountability and points of reference we use to negotiate our identity, both within ourselves and in relation to others (Knights & Clarke, 2014). Our “self-narrative” becomes more complex, and at the same time more urgent (Giddens, 1991).

In higher education, change has been massive over the past half century. Trends such as the massification of HE, globalisation, technological developments (including online education), neoliberal influences, reduced funding, marketization and competition have driven significant transformations (Henkel, 2010). In Europe, the Bologna

process¹ and the resulting shift toward outcomes based and student-centred learning are an additional impact factor (Henkel, 2010; Kehm, 2015; Zellweger Moser & Bachmann, 2010). These developments have changed how HE institutions operate, how they relate to their students, and what roles and responsibilities are allocated to the different parts of the organisation. New areas have emerged (e.g. Learning Technology Centres), centralised departments have assumed more importance (e.g. Marketing, International Relations), and new pressures drive priorities and funding decisions (e.g. research, accreditation requirements, etc.).

As a consequence, HE workforce – and their sense of professional identity – has been subject to significant shifts. The challenges these changes have brought about are reflected in a growing body of research on academic professional identity, which – once deeply rooted in the shared values and community of the academic discipline – has become more fragile (Calvert, Lewis, & Spindler, 2011; Arvaja, 2018; Cardoso, Batista, & Graça, 2014; Macfarlane, 2011). This phenomenon has been investigated from a variety of perspectives. For example, Knights & Clarke (2014) identified several forms of academic insecurity (imposters, aspirants, existential concerns), arguing that academic professional identity and insecurity are multi-dimensional and interrelated concepts. Calvert et al. (2011) explored how academics establish a sense of identity based on where they decided to put their effort and time. They discovered a strong sense of duty and service, which however came at a cost to their own wellbeing. Investigating yet another angle, Macfarlane (2011) claims that a “hollowing out” (p. 69) of academic roles has occurred, brought about by new managerial models which require specialists rather than academic “all-rounders”. Referring to the traditional roles of academics in the areas of teaching, research and service, he maintains that many of the traditional responsibilities of academic staff, especially those related to student support, have been taken up by non-academic HE professionals, thus “eroding the academic profession’s collective memory about its key purpose” (Macfarlane 2011, p. 71).

While academic staff struggle with re-defining their identity in the face of what Macfarlane labels the “unbundling” of academic practice” (2011, p. 59), the focus in this study is on the identities of those HE staff who are being employed in rising numbers to take up some of these “unbundled”

roles, straddling a space between the academic and non-academic spheres of HE institutions, an area termed “Third Space” by Whitchurch (2008; 2012). Section 3 describes the context and characteristics of these roles, providing the theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis.

3. Theoretical framework

The framework for analysis in this study is based on the work of Whitchurch (2008; 2012; 2018) and her characterisation of “Third Space professionals”. “Third Space”, a concept originally derived from the work of Bhabha (2010), describes the location of encounters between different cultures, where negotiation of meaning occurs, new identities are constructed, and new forms of community develop. Transferring this notion to higher education, Whitchurch (2008; 2012) defines “Third Space” as the emergent territory between academic and professional domains, the sphere that is inhabited by employees who do not fall neatly into the academic group, nor do they solely belong to the non-academic group of staff. Based on her findings in an international study investigating these roles, Whitchurch (2008; 2012) developed a categorization of non-academic staff into bounded professionals, cross-boundary professionals, unbounded professionals, and blended professionals.

We will focus here on the definition of the “blended professionals” who are employed specifically to work across the academic and administrative areas, so their roles are positioned in a hybrid space by design. Blended professionals have varied backgrounds, and their place in the structure of a university can be awkward. Some of them are situated as executive officers or strategic advisers to HE leaders (Smith, Holden, Yu, & Hanlon, 2021), others are part of new “Third Space” organisational units such as eLearning support or technology areas (Beckingham, 2015; Behari-Leak & Le Roux, 2018; Stoltenkamp, van de Heyde, & Siebrits, 2017; White, White, & Borthwick, 2021), others again are in traditional areas that have changed their role over time (Behari-Leak & Le Roux, 2018; Veles, 2016).

Professional identity construction and continuity for “blended professionals” can be difficult (Smith et al., 2021; White et al., 2021). They often lack clear reporting lines or team memberships, and even if these are given, they are only one “base”, with other factors and actors impacting on their role and work. Blended professionals usually work with a range of different stakeholders across organisational boundaries who have their own cultures, languages, and priorities (Veles, Carter, & Boon, 2019). Many blended professionals find themselves in the role of change agents,

¹ The **Bologna Process** is a European HE reform process launched in 1999. It aims to enhance the quality of European HE systems, improve student and staff mobility and collaboration, introduce joint instruments such as the European Credit Transfer System and quality assurance standards.

disrupting existing practices and complacencies for others (Smith et al., 2021). There is also a lack of clear career pathways for these professionals (Moran & Misra, 2018), who frequently forge their own path, often in the form of “portfolio careers”. All these conditions impact on self-perception, require frequent adaptation and development of one’s approaches, allegiances and self-representation, and make identity work constant and complex.

As an increasing number of HE staff are experiencing these circumstances, more work is required that explores the nuances of how these professionals experience their evolving identity in the Third Space. The framework discussed here provides a solid foundation for analysis, individual self-reflection, and interpretation. There is, however, a lack of studies that provide authentic insights into the Third Space professional experience from blended professionals themselves. My autoethnographic study addresses this gap in the literature with a contribution that draws on the elements of Whitchurch’s framework, but is embedded in a specific context, background, and biography, and speaks with an authentic voice.

4. Methodology

This study employs autoethnography, a research method which uses self-reflective autobiographical data as its basis and has the purpose of “understanding self and its connection to others” (Chang, 2008), p. 56). Firmly rooted in qualitative and interpretive research paradigms, autoethnography is a form of self-narrative writing that “combines cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative detail” (Chang, 2008, p. 46). Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis (2014) propose that “when we do autoethnography, we look inward – into our identities, thoughts, feelings, experiences – and outward – into our relationships, communities and cultures” (p. 46).

Autoethnographic studies share a number of characteristics (Adams et al., 2014):

- They focus on personal experience;
- They describe the process of sense-making of the autoethnographer;
- They emphasise reflexivity;
- They provide deep insights into the socio-cultural setting;
- They include critical analysis of cultural norms and practices;
- They seek to engage their audience.

These characteristics make autoethnography a particularly suitable method for this study. My research aim is to explore my professional identity work in the context of the HE culture I find myself in, and through the process of writing². Adding authentic reflections based on lived experience to the discussion about blended professional identity contributes insider knowledge and in-depth interpretation, and offers opportunities for the researcher as well as her audience. Engaging in autoethnographic research can trigger profound self-reflection on the researcher’s own situation and role. This can help her develop a deeper understanding of her own complex emotions, perceptions, and thoughts (Lee, 2020), potentially enabling a greater sense of self both in terms of her own needs and in terms of her social relationships, roles, and actions at work. The research results can illustrate, deepen and expand the understanding of this space and thus contribute to the body of knowledge exploring HE roles, identity issues, and career development. This is useful for other blended professionals in similar situations, but also for those in their immediate context, for supervisors, colleagues, and others working with these types of roles.

Autoethnography is often criticized for being self-indulgent and not analytic enough to be a serious form of research (Anderson, 2006). In order to mitigate this potential weakness, I have used multiple data sources as the basis of this study, consisting of a short narrative and a visual timeline describing my career, a “Role-Gram” illustrating the different roles and relationships I have, self-reflective writing in the form of 20 Vignettes, and an interview with a colleague.

My curriculum vitae is presented in a timeline and short narrative and describes my career development, illustrating the evolution of my professional roles in HE in two different countries and provides the background for my identity dilemmas explored from a historical perspective.

A “Role-Gram”, an adapted version of the “Culture-Gram” proposed by Chang (2008), structures and details the different identities I perceive in my current role at work in the format of a mindmap. Chang’s model has the purpose of allowing “people to visualise their social selves” (Chang, 2008). My Role-Gram has a tighter focus and less dimen-

²Even though this study mainly focuses on my professional identity, it is important to mention some key identification aspects that are likely to have an impact on my experience. I am female, mid-career, have gathered experience in different HE institutions on different continents, and am the main breadwinner in a family of four. Exploring these factors as contextual determinants of my professional identity work would go beyond the scope of this study, but they should be noted.

sions than Chang's model as it is limited to my professional context rather than including broader life perspectives. It is a useful analytical tool to identify different aspects of my the different roles my job entails, including how I view my identities in each role and how these are related to the different groups of people I work with.

The core data set for empirical analysis consists of 20 "Vignettes" of self-observational and reflective writing composed over six weeks in early 2021. The Vignette titles and a short summary are provided in table 1. Vignettes 1 - 4 are reflections on my past experiences leading up to the current crisis of identity and serve as important catalysts to bring to the fore perceptions of myself in past employment situations, which have a strong impact on how I see myself in my current role. Vignettes 5-19 were written after critical incidents at work during the reflection process and provide insight into current situations and my feelings about them, with a focus on how they reinforce or change my sense of identity. Vignette 20 is a concluding reflection on possible future developments of my professional identity.

In order to validate my reflections and include another perspective, I conducted a narrative interview with a trusted work colleague. The interviewee was selected based a number of grounds: she knows me and my work, is not part of my immediate work team, has no invested interest in my professional area, and she knows the institution I work in well. She is also a person who has experience in coaching and advising others on career decisions. The narrative interview was conducted face-to-face, using a set of foundational questions and was subsequently transcribed.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012), inductively identifying themes as they emerged from the vignettes in a cyclical process of analysing, coding, validating, and creating themes, which are expressed in different facets of "identity". The resulting themes were correlated with the literature. For the coding process and the development of themes the software Atlas.ti was used.

There are ethical implications that require consideration in this study. According to Adams et al. (2014), [autoethnographers] "must be equally committed to conducting their work responsibly and ethically; they must consider the personal, relational, and institutional risks and responsibilities of doing autoethnography" (p. 25). This autoethnography is set in a real workplace and includes reference to my relationships with others and to institutional practices, some of which I find difficult. Whilst I have taken care to maintain anonymity of people I have mentioned, it may be possible

to identify certain persons for those who are familiar with the organisation. I have taken care to stay objective in my description of certain incidents and fair in my representation of others. Readers should remember that the narrative is my personal and subjective perspective.

In the following sections I focus on answering the research question by first providing a narrative of my development as a blended professional and a description of the characteristics of my role that identify me as a member of this group. After establishing these circumstances, I define the profiles of four distinct professional identities resulting from the data analysis with critical reference to the literature. These are constructions of my professional identity that have resulted from the self-reflective narrative process I have engaged with in the course of writing this research. The conclusion offers a summary of the key findings.

5. Becoming a "Blended Professional" in the Third Space

In order to understand how I conceive of my identity in my current role, it is necessary to look at how my career has developed. The timeline (Figure 1) shows the key stations in my career path, spanning at total of 25 years. It is important to note that I worked at four different institutions and that a majority of my career in terms of years and the steepest career progression took place in Australia. My return to Austria was a side-step in my career and marks the start of a less linear and more fragmented development.

After finishing my master's degree, I started my career as an assistant lecturer at the English department in a strictly academic context, with teaching, research and administrative duties. My roles were clearly defined, and I was part of a small team of other assistant lecturers who all fulfilled similar duties. After two years I was offered a project position in the educational technology area of the university and was soon appointed Coordinator, New Media in Teaching, a newly created position reporting to the pro-vice chancellor, Teaching and Evaluation as well as the head of IT Services.

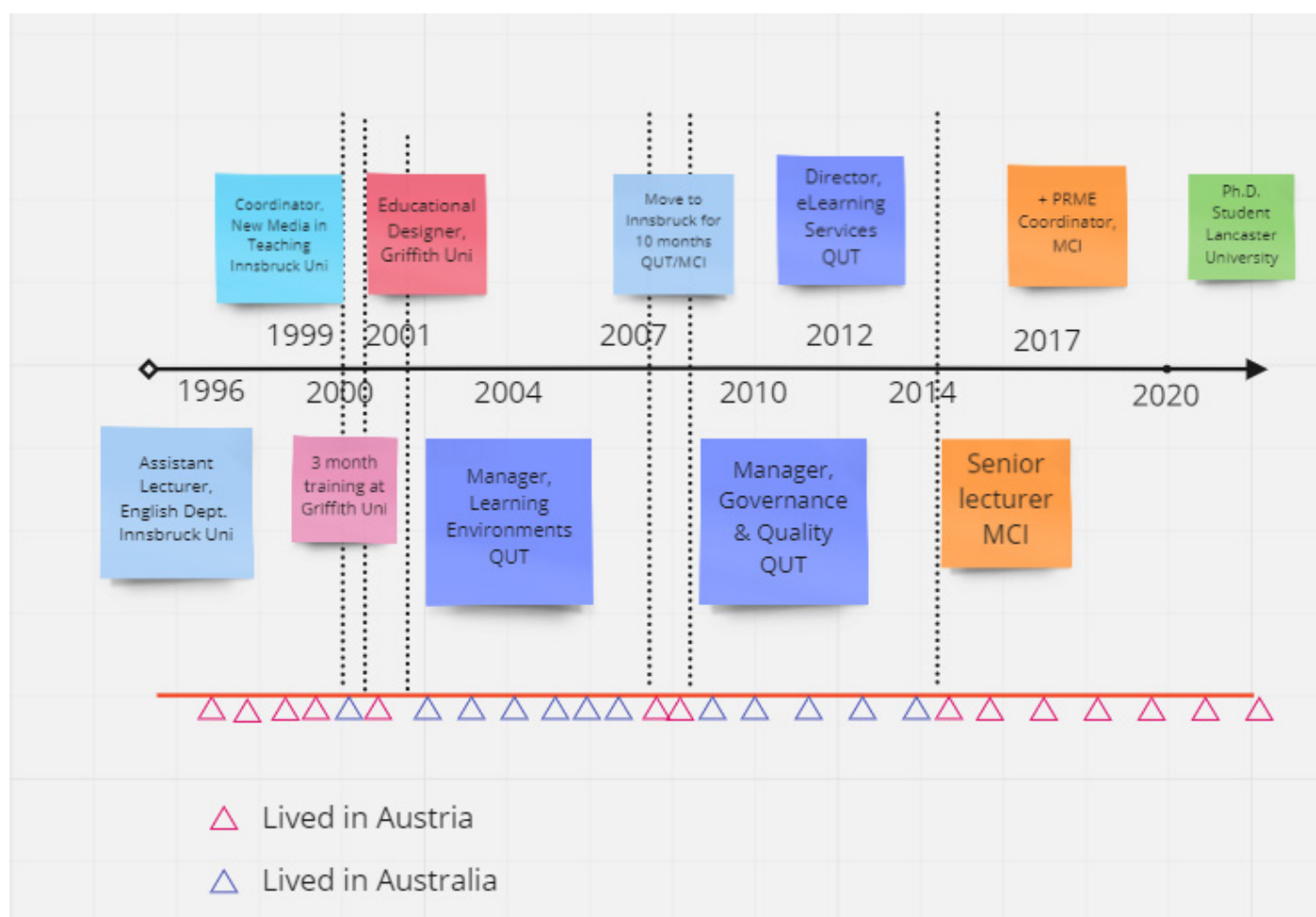
This was a big step for me. Leaving a strictly academic role to venture into a field that was new for me and new for the university was exciting, but came with big challenges at the same time. There were competing interests at the university. I keenly felt the rift between the technical and academic areas, which I had to balance. My still forming sense of professional identity was challenged, and there were only few allies I felt I could relate to.

Table 1. Overview of self-reflective Vignettes

Vignette 1: DIGGING IN THE PAST	Reflections on the development of my career, the different roles I held, opportunities taken and not taken, and how various styles of my leaders and other contextual aspects helped or hindered my development.
Vignette 2: LONGING FOR DOWN UNDER	Describes my feelings of homesickness for Australia and the aspects I miss both about the physical place and about my professional context.
Vignette 3: THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE	Reflections on moving from Australia to Austria, and the impact this has had on my family and myself.
Vignette 4: THE LUNCH THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING	Describes a critical incident which changed my sense of identity in the team, my relationship with my manager, and my professional security.
Vignette 5: THE MISSING LABEL	Illustrates the difficulties involved in having a role that is not easy to define and encompasses many different responsibilities.
Vignette 6: THE BROKER (WITHOUT A LICENSE)	Reflections on my role as project manager across different teams and the sense that I am assuming authority I may not have.
Vignette 7: THE ACTIVIST (WHO ISN'T ONE)	Describes my passion for responsible management education and my enthusiasm for furthering this field at my institution, but also the unclear legitimacy I have to do so.
Vignette 8: MORE WORK FOR ME	Illustrates how I create more work for myself in a project that is self-initiated but not sanctioned.
Vignette 9: THE FRIENDLY - ORGANISED - MOTIVATING TEACHER	Reflections on my role as an educator based on the feedback received from students through course evaluation.
Vignette 10: THE EU PROJECT	Account of my reactions to a new project I am leading in collaboration with six European partner Universities, and my excitement to start something new and creative, together with international partners.
Vignette 11: THE MUDDLE WITH THE SPIN-OFF	Describes a situation where lack of information and thorough planning leads to frustration.
Vignette 12: THE FACULTY WORKSHOP	Documents my sentiments after a successful faculty workshop, which has energised and uplifted me.
Vignette 13: THE STUDENT CONNECTION	Illustrates an example of direct collaboration with a student team who are planning a sustainability initiative.
Vignette 14: THE ETHICS COMMITTEE MEETING	Describes my participation in the Research Ethics committee, explaining activities and responsibilities and how I enjoy having a legitimate and active role.
Vignette 15: THE ACCREDITATION (THAT WAS AND THEN WASN'T A PRIORITY)	Reflections on my involvement in preparing for an accreditation, highlighting lack of clear communication.
Vignette 16: INTRODUCTION AT THE INTERVIEW	Account of my experience as part of an interview panel, where I found it difficult to clearly explain to the applicant what my role is
Vignette 17: THE MENTORING PROGRAM	Describes a project I conducted with a colleague outside the department, which was a great success and which I really enjoyed.
Vignette 18: THE TEAM MEETING	Illustrates how I feel awkward after a team meeting, where I report on my various activities because they seem so remote from what the rest of the team does.

Table 1. (cont.) Overview of self-reflective Vignettes

Vignette 19: THE MEETING THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN	Reflections on a critical incident where a meeting that was important to me was cancelled and the impact this had on me.
Vignette 20: THOUGHTS ABOUT THE FUTURE	Captures thoughts about the future of my career and raises existential questions about what path I should take.

Figure 1. Career timeline

After a year, I was sent to a partner university in Australia to work with them for three months. The Australian university had a strategic focus on online education and a large team of professionals in their eLearning department. I could not only take away significant knowledge and expertise, but for the first in my career I felt at home professionally – I had found my tribe, a community that shared my language, my sense of purpose, my interest in helping learners and faculty, and my desire to explore and develop the opportunities offered by learning technology. The three months passed quickly, and I returned to Austria much enriched, but also feeling that I left

behind a professional family of sorts, and part of my identity that I knew would not prevail in my work context.

About a year later, the Australian university offered me a position, and I returned initially for six months, but ended up staying for the next 14 years. Feeling like I was getting another chance to become what I was meant to be professionally, I quickly worked my way up from Educational Designer to various management roles. In 2012, I finally became interim Director for eLearning Services. In this position, I was in charge of a department of about 45 staff and

reported to the Deputy Vice Chancellor. This was a period of massive change in the organisation. I did my best to navigate the competing demands, the side-digs from senior colleagues who were pursuing their own agendas, and the insecurity all this created amongst my staff. It was stressful, and it turned me off senior management roles. When the position was advertised permanently, I decided not to apply, partly because I had enough of the politics and stress I had experienced, but mainly because I wanted to move back to Europe with my family. This was a significant turning point in my career, and I made a conscious decision that roles managing large teams of people were not what I wanted to continue doing.

I accepted a job at a small but ambitious university of applied sciences in Austria, which offered me a role in building up their online learning program. I was familiar with the institution, having spent 10 months there during a secondment several years earlier, and I knew both my future line manager and the Vice Chancellor. We agreed that I would take on a role as senior lecturer, do some teaching, but would mainly concentrate on building up the eLearning capacity of the institution within a small team of four. Although I was taking a massive side step in my career progression, I was excited by the thought of starting something new and working with an ambitious and motivated team. I knew I would get along well with my line manager, whom I regarded as an equal and friend. We agreed that we would work in partnership, share responsibilities, and I would act as his deputy.

The first few years were great. We worked hard on developing a number of online programs, established a faculty development program, and worked closely with other stakeholders. I enjoyed the creative work, the collaboration with colleagues, and sharing my knowledge with others immensely. My manager and I shared an office, which meant I was familiar with what was going on and communication was easy, not requiring much effort or planning.

The reputation of our team grew, and so did the demands and the workload. I had taken on some additional tasks and projects in the area of responsible management education that were not in the direct brief of the team, and this required me to liaise directly with the Vice Chancellor. I worked on another project with the head of the Career Center. I met other people through these and further activities. We moved to a bigger office and I no longer shared a space with my line manager. My sense of my position in the team changed.

2019 was a busy year with a high teaching load and several projects that demanded a lot of time. In the middle

of a stressful week, my manager asked me to have a talk. He told me about a few of my tasks that had not been completed the way he had hoped and asked me if I still wanted to be part of his team. I was shocked. I thought I had worked hard and was getting good results. I did not see this coming.

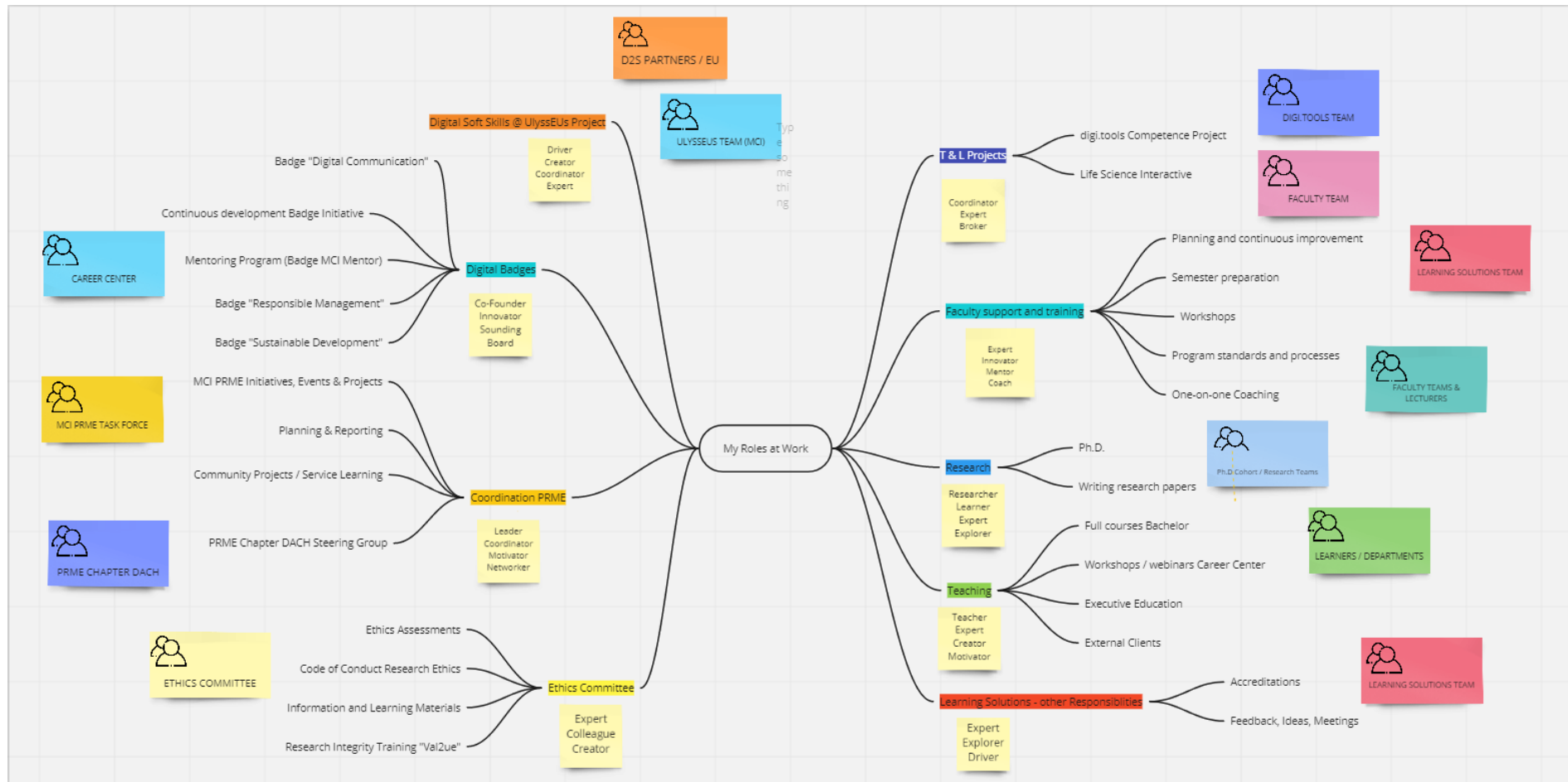
This critical incident was a significant turning point for me. It made me question my identity in terms of my position in the team, my motivation to pursue projects outside the teams' core portfolio, and the way I related to my line manager and other colleagues. My professional identity that had been relatively stable and secure up to this point suddenly became an issue. There was a rupture in the narrative, a dissonance that has been growing since then. This sense of loss and unease prompted me to engage in critical self-reflection and provides the basis for this autoethnographic study. In the next two sections, I will first discuss what makes me a "Blended Professional in the Third Space" and then analyse factors that impact – positively and negatively - my identity work in this role.

6. What makes me a "blended professional" in the third space?

Whitchurch (2012) defines "blended professionals" as "dedicated appointments spanning professional and academic domains" (p.408). Blended professionals are often required to work in ambiguous conditions, to understand different perceptions of the institution, to build partnerships and networks with a range of stakeholders, and to deal with diverse and potentially competing agendas. Whitchurch (2009) identifies four defining aspects impacting blended professionals: space, relationships, languages and legitimacies.

My current roles and responsibilities are clearly defined by these aspects. My duty statement includes teaching (which makes up about 40% of my overall workload), strategy development, faculty training and support for online learning. In terms of space, this situates me between the academic and the administrative/support areas of the institution. Organisationally, I am a member of a central service supporting online teaching and consisting of the manager and eight staff. Over time, I have developed many other ties to colleagues across and beyond the institution, so my relationships include a wide network. Depending on the context, I have to adapt to different languages, both in the use of actual languages (German or English) and in terms of adopting the specific terms, jargon, acronyms, etc. of a department, external partner organisation, or project group. My legitimacies are partly derived from my role in

Figure 2. Role-Gram



my immediate work team or as a lecturer, however there are other areas where they stem from directions from university management, and sometimes through my own active engagement.

The professional Role-Gram (Figure 2) is adapted from the concept of a Culture-Gram developed by Chang, which has the purpose of allowing “people to visualise their social selves” (Chang, 2008). It is used here to visualise my professional selves, including the aspects of space, relationships, and legitimacies discussed above. For each area (space)

of responsibility, I have identified a minimum of three descriptors that define how I see my role (legitimacies) in relation to the relevant groups I work with (relationships). The language aspects is not described explicitly here, and also plays a minor role in my experience overall. It implicitly impacts on the three other dimensions, but is not as prevalent as those or as relevant for my identity struggles.

Apart from the academic roles (teaching, research), all of my other responsibilities fall into what can be described as “Third Space” activities. They vary in their focus, but they encompass mostly strategic agendas either in the area of digital competences, online learning and teaching, or responsible management education. As the descriptors demonstrate, I see my role in most of the activity spheres as a driver, coordinator, and expert, in some of them as innovator/creator and explorer, and in others as broker or connector.

The Role-Gram illustrates the complexity of my role and confirms the notion that HE professionals are

“no longer being defined by their roles, accountabilities and position descriptions, but rather by complex and constructed identities, their relationships with other university communities and by their own perception of what it means to be professional in the contemporary higher education environment” (Veles, 2016).

This corresponds closely with the core functions and characteristics of blended professionals identified in the literature. Whitchurch (2018) emphasises the fact that blended professionals are likely to pursue a range of different agendas and may need to deal with tensions and competing priorities in doing so. Thus, the “location and ownership of professional activities [...] may well be subject to ongoing negotiation.” (Whitchurch, 2018, p. 10). Salden (2012), whilst questioning if Third Space is indeed a new phenomenon in HE, points to the fact that the number of personnel in this category is growing significantly, and that the novelty

lies more in the need for a better definition of their complex professional identities and their quest for clearer positioning or belonging within the organisation. Schneiderberg et al. (2013) discuss the roles of Third Space professionals, which they term Higher Education Professionals (HEPROS), in relation to academic and administrative university staff. They identify new and emerging functions in university administration as well as an unbundling of the role of the traditional academic role, leading to differentiation, which in turn leads to identity issues.

These findings in existing research confirm my personal experience as a professional working under these circumstances, and validate my sense of disorientation. In the next section, I explore how the multi-faceted aspects of my professional identity are constructed and what challenges and opportunities they entail.

7. Perceptions of identity

The aim of this study is to analyse how I construct and navigate my professional identity in the context described above. Consequently, the data analysis focussed on identifying units of meaning and themes which were clustered, resulting in four distinct facets of my professional identity:

- The creative professional with strong values and motivation
- The autonomous (change) agent lacking strategic impact and direction
- The un-belonging team worker, networker and lateral leader
- The experienced professional with a career ahead

These labels demonstrate a sense of self with both positive and ambivalent connotations and some qualifying descriptors. In the following, I will discuss each identity in the context of my authentic experience and with reference to the relevant literature.

7.1 Identity 1: The creative professional with strong values and motivation

Many of the positively connoted activities in the data analysed are related to creating something new: a new curriculum, a new skills framework, a new format for online content, a new student initiative, a new mentoring program. This confirms the notion that Third Space is often a creative zone, an incubation space, where innovation happens and new approaches are tested (Behari-Leak & Le Roux, 2018; Conway, 2013).

In these projects, I can be inventive, apply and expand my expertise, and collaborate with others in the development of something meaningful. These aspects are central to the construction of my professional identity. As the adjectives used to describe my emotions show, involvement in these activities makes me feel “excited”, “happy”, “pleased”, “proud”, “passionate” and “energized”. This is reflected in the feedback from my colleague:

“I see you as ... an expert in different areas and also as someone who has the ability to create new things, who can develop projects, innovate and coordinate.” (Interview 1)

There is also a strong emphasis on being engaged in meaningful work and putting my energy into tasks that are aligned with my educational values. This is especially noticeable in the section below:

“I do this work not because I want to get something out of it personally but because I believe that we as an institution and as a society are not doing nearly enough when it comes to preparing our students for the challenges the future will hold for them.” (Vignette 6)

On the other hand, there are some activities that are demotivating:

“Doing menial tasks such as technical support is something I am not very keen on (and to be quite honest also feel I should not be doing at this stage of my career and at the level I am at), but is also part of my role.” (Vignette 7)

The emphasis on expertise, innovation and creativity as well as meaningful work can be seen as an expression of the basic human needs that impact motivation generally, and specifically in the workplace (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017). It also becomes clear that professional and personal identities are hardly separable, especially when it comes to the alignment of values. Our professional identities are “also a matter of what we care about in the world [which] ... cannot be blocked of, hidden or erased as one transitions into new professional roles and settings.” (Behari-Leak & Le Roux, 2018).

Deci et al. (2017) maintain that identification with the values and meaning of one’s work results in “enhanced qualities for work motivation” (p.24). Similarly, Whitchurch argues that internal motivation can be driven by the desire to promote and drive initiatives that have an impact on and

develop different invested groups, thus also providing “a sense of legitimacy” (Whitchurch 2012, p. 73). This is certainly the case for my engagement in the PRME³ initiative:

“I spend hours (night and day) dreaming up new initiatives and activities, I try involving colleagues who are interested and want to contribute through the PRME task force, and I try engaging students at different levels. I also feel I have been able to help shift the rector’s attitude towards the topic.” (Vignette 7)

In summary, creativity, meaningful work and alignment with my values are strong drivers and an important foundation of this part of my professional identity.

7.2 Identity 2: The autonomous (change) agent lacking strategic impact and direction

While I enjoy the autonomy that allows me to be the creative professional, there are also issues associated with this freedom. They are related to strategic alignment, legitimacy, and lack of guidance.

I am convinced that the work I do is important. However, because of the absence of clearly defined institutional goals in this area, I am seeing myself at risk of “mission drift” (Smith et al., 2021). Because of my ambiguous role within the organisational hierarchy, I do not have access to the structures that shape and influence strategic directions. My line manager does not see some of the activities led by me as his responsibility. This has the consequence that the activities I lead are not represented in the leadership team, as the following passage illustrates:

“There is nobody in the leadership team who reports on these activities, so they remain unreported in the ‘upper circle’ of the institution.” (Vignette 18)

Strategic alignment in the sense of “should I do this or not” is discussed in informal discussions that give me a sense of direction. But they only happen sporadically and when I initiate them.

Legitimacy of what I do as part of my core team is a related issue, which becomes apparent in this reflection after a team meeting:

3 PRME stands for Principles of Responsible Management Education and is an initiative of the United Nations Global Compact that aims to embed responsibility, sustainability and ethics into the business school curricula. It is a global network consisting of over 800 business schools.

“I feel a bit like I am stealing time from my “real job” (whatever that is). I do run ideas and thoughts past my line manager, and he is very supportive of them in our talks. He has also frequently commented that my enthusiasm for this topic is palpable. However, when it comes to actually putting ideas into practice, I often feel like I have to defend what I am doing.” (Vignette 7)

My search for strategic direction is related to the signals I receive from my line manager. How much I rely on him to confirm my actions is demonstrated by my disappointment when he cancels a long-planned one-on-one meeting:

“Due to the many different projects I am involved in, I find it really important to update him [my line manager] frequently, and we have agreed on this being an important aspect of working together. His email says simply that he can’t make the meeting but that we will probably find some time next week. No alternative suggestion for a good time, no reason why he can’t make it.” (Vignette 19)

The frustration here results from my sense of lack of direction and leadership. In addition, the need to connect with my manager also derives from wanting to re-connect with the base and to relate, which is at the core of a further facet of my identity.

7.3 Identity 3: The un-belonging team worker, net-worker and lateral leader

The importance of belonging comes through strongly in my reflections, and is related to space (including physical location) and relationships.

My position in the team gives me legitimacy as a digital learning and teaching expert and as someone who is knowledgeable about digital competences. It was for this expertise that I was hired, and it is still formally spelled out in my duty statement that I spend about 60% of my time in this space. It is not, however, represented in my position name, “Senior Lecturer,” which is very generic. On the one hand, this allows for flexibility and agility in terms of my developing roles and responsibilities. On the other hand, it echoes the lack of clarity of my role, and the difficulties of identification which arise from this. The narrative in the vignettes reflects a strong feeling of uncertainty about where I belong.

“I am also unsure about what a stronger focus on this area [PRME] would mean for my position in the organisation. Would I still be part of the team? Would I move

into another area? Would I be team- and homeless? Questions upon questions, and with that quite a lot of insecurity and a sense of un-belonging.” (Vignette 20)

My relationships with the colleagues in my team is friendly and honest, and we work together very well. However, as I started to work more closely with colleagues in other departments, and as some of the initial projects became ongoing activities, the ties within the team weakened. This is mirrored in the feedback from my colleague, who observed:

“Your connections outside of your department are stronger than those within.” (Interview 1)

This sometimes leads to a certain dissonance as I feel that the “outside” activities I undertake are not really seen as “team activities” but as something I do personally, beyond the remit of the team.

“I often have the feeling I have to “prove” ... that I am pulling my weight also with those things, which are often picked up by my two more junior colleagues. After my “critical incident” a few years ago [when my line manager asked me if I still wanted to be part of the team], I am constantly on edge with regards to not appearing as if I don’t contribute to the team.” (Vignette 7)

The long period of working remotely during the 2020 pandemic, the resulting move to a different office a few floors from the main office and the social distancing necessary have aggravated this situation.

Despite these difficulties, the relationships I have, both inside and outside my team, are strong, valuable and important to me:

“Working with these multiple teams and stakeholders is fun, rewarding, and gives me a lot of exposure to different parts of the organisation.” (Vignette 1)

My internal and cross-boundary networks shown in the Role-Gram put me in a good position to identify linkages, synergies and opportunities for collaboration, and they enable my role of broker and lateral leader and develop “university cross-border collaborative capital” (Veles et al., 2019). This “subtle lateral leadership” role was emphasised in the interview with my colleague:

“You have a wide radius of influence ... [which] is not based on your function, but on you as a person, your personality. You are someone who likes to share her

knowledge, who wants to develop things, who can take herself back, and who values the contribution and input of others.” (Interview 1)

Whitchurch also emphasises this characteristic of blended professionals, who “build their credibility on a personal basis, via lateral relationships with colleagues inside and outside the university.” (Whitchurch 2008, p. 394).

The opportunities presenting themselves through my involvement in internal and external projects, the relationships I am able to develop, and the possibility to apply my expertise and make a difference in different contexts compensate for the unease I experience as a member of my immediate team. They also play a role in terms of my professional growth and career development, the topic of the next identity aspect.

7.4 Identity 4: The experienced professional with a career ahead

Engaging in this autoethnographic work has enabled me to analyse my current role and identify opportunities and challenges. This has given me a clearer sense of how I see myself in the organisation, including the values I hold, the assets I have, and the issues I need to tackle. It has also prompted reflection on how I should approach my future career development.

Kehm (2015) asserts that HE professional roles rarely have career progression models, even though they frequently contribute to the professionalization of other parts of the university. This is also the case at my institution. While – as a senior lecturer – I can pursue an academic career progression model, it would mean increasing my teaching load, conducting more research, and in essence giving up my “Third Space” role. This is not really where I want to head. However there are no other formal progression options. There are also doubts about my professional expertise and knowledge regarding taking a different direction:

“I have spent my life in online learning and teaching. This is where my expertise is, this is what my core professional background is, this is where I am on the ball with current literature. I am not an expert in sustainability education by any means. I have picked up a lot since I have become engaged in this area, but I still feel that I do not have the credentials to really claim expertise and professional experience in this area.” (Vignette 20)

The absence of this charted career path prompts me to find possibilities to grow and develop as a professional in other ways. For example, I have recently taken on a role as my institution’s lead in a project on digital skills with partners from five universities across Europe. This provides me with the opportunity to collaborate with new colleagues and to use both my subject matter expertise and my project management skills to work towards a joint outcome.

“This project is a very welcome addition to my responsibilities. We will create something new and meaningful for our students’ future skills development, and I have the opportunity to work with a team of colleagues at different universities. I will also be able to position myself within the wider network, which might lead to future opportunities for collaboration and connection.” (Vignette 10)

In addition, I have recently enrolled in a Ph.D. program, which has given me access to an additional academic world. Here, I can experiment with new ways of thinking, develop my research skills, and engage with a group of peers and with tutors at a different level in a collegial way geared towards advancing learning and scholarship.

These activities allow me to grow intellectually, professionally and personally, work in new contexts, and connect with an extended network of colleagues across different countries, sectors, and interests. My engagement here is a step toward a future self that might struggle less with issues of legitimacy and belonging. It is an effort to take a proactive approach toward the structural and interpersonal challenges of my current position and to further develop my professional portfolio. It will also allow me to position myself more strategically and strongly within my current institution and – just as importantly – in my own perception and narrative of my professional identity.

8. Implications and conclusion

Blended professionals constitute a growing and integral part of the HE workforce today. The space they inhabit continues to evolve, posing challenges in terms of their professional identification. Through the analysis of my experience in a blended role, this study has resulted in a number of findings that have relevance beyond my individual situation.

Firstly, my findings underline the importance of reflective practice for professionals in similar roles. Through reflection, analysis, writing about and illustrating layers of my role, as well as constructing different versions of my identity, I have

come to a much better understanding of my position, my values, challenges, motivations and options. The significance of reflective practice is confirmed in the literature. Smith et al. assert that “professionals who examine their evolving identities and expertise may be better positioned to address ambiguity or positional liminality barriers in their work” (Smith et al. 2021, p. 11). Behari-Leak & Le Roux argue that “the assertion of a personal identity in the professional space is ... an active and reflective process ... and, when attained, can be considered an achievement.” (Behari-Leak & Le Roux, 2018).

Further, my study reiterates – and in some instances adds to – the essential factors for Third Space professionals to be successful, effective and confident in their roles: clear organisational goals, good communication, opportunities for creativity and meaningful work, support from supervisors are all necessary prerequisites to confirm legitimacy and enable blended professionals to thrive in the often uncharted contexts they operate in. The role of supervisors is also emphasised by Smith et al. (2021) who maintain that apart from providing direction and purpose, “the leaders who oversee our work also serve as mentors for developing our capacity as third space staff” (Smith et al., 2021), p.11). They also play a role in rewarding work and motivating us.

Finally, my results confirm the absence of a clear career development model for blended professionals, which is also reported in the literature (Kehm, 2015; Moran & Misra, 2018). This may lead to a lack of perspective and frustration and should be addressed by institutions. In the absence of clear progression opportunities, creative professionals will construct their own unique portfolios and profiles, and assert their identities as well as their legitimate place in the organisation through these, as long as they are recognised and rewarded accordingly.

This study has obvious limitations due to the uniqueness of my experience, which is not only determined by the specific conditions in my workplace but also influenced by the contextual aspects of my background and circumstances. However, the key outcomes can be transferred to other settings and may also inform further exploration of this topic.

Future research should include more authentic voices (like my own in this study) who deepen our understanding of the real issues affecting professionals in the Third Space and add diversity at the same time. Further investigation is also necessary to explore appropriate leadership approaches and support for these roles, considering autonomy, motivation, rewards and recognition, and career progression. In light of the rapidly changing work contexts experienced by

many professionals today, it would be important to explore the emergence of Third Space professionals in organisational contexts beyond HE such as the primary and secondary education sector, or indeed any area where traditional roles and boundaries are in flux, and new roles emerge as a consequence.

In conclusion, I am hoping that my study may be helpful to professionals in comparable roles who are on a similar quest for their place in the institution and for a more secure professional identity.

References

- Akkerman, S. F., & Meijer, P. C. (2011). A dialogical approach to conceptualizing teacher identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(2), 308–319. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.08.013>
- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic Autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373–395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449>
- Arvaja, M. (2018). Tensions and striving for coherence in an academic’s professional identity work. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(3), 291–306.
- Bauman, Z. (2001). Identity in the globalising world. *Social Anthropology*, 9(02). <https://doi.org/10.1017/s096402820100009x>
- Beckingham, S. (2015). *The really useful #edtechbook*. (The Really Useful #EdTechBook). [Place of publication not identified]: Createspace.
- Behari-Leak, K., & Le Roux, M. N. (2018). Between a rock and a hard place, third space practitioners exercise agency. *Perspectives in Education*, 36(1). <https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v36i1.3>
- Bhabha, H. K. (2010). *The location of culture* (1. publ., repr.). London: Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. M. Cooper & P. M. Camic (Eds.), *APA handbooks in psychology. APA handbook of research methods in psychology: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Calvert, M., Lewis, T., & Spindler, J. (2011). Negotiating Professional Identities in Higher Education: Dilemmas

- and Priorities of Academic Staff. *Research in Education*, 86(1), 25–38. <https://doi.org/10.7227/RIE.86.3>
- Cardoso, I., Batista, P., & Graça, A. (2014). Professional Identity in Analysis: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *The Open Sports Sciences Journal*, 7(1), 83–97. <https://doi.org/10.2174/1875399X01407010083>
- Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as Method. Developing Qualitative Inquiry: v.1*. Walnut Creek: Taylor and Francis.
- Conway, M. (2013). Reconstructing identities in higher education: the rise of third space professionals. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 35(5), 568–570. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2013.825399>
- Deci, E. L., Olafsen, A. H., & Ryan, R. M. (2017). Self-Determination Theory in Work Organizations: The State of a Science. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 4(1), 19–43. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032516-113108>
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Henkel, M. (2010). Introduction: Change and Continuity in Academic and Professional Identities. In G. Gordon & C. Whitchurch (Eds.), *International Studies in Higher Education Ser. Academic and professional identities in higher education: The challenges of a diversifying workforce* (pp. 3–12). New York: Routledge.
- Kehm, B. M. (2015). Academics and New Higher Education Professionals: Tensions, Reciprocal Influences and Forms of Professionalization. In T. Fumasoli, G. Goastellec, & B. Kehm (Eds.), *The changing academy--the changing academic profession in international comparative perspective: Vol. 12. Academic work and careers in Europe: Trends, challenges, perspectives* (pp. 177–200). Cham, New York: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-10720-2_9
- Knights, D., & Clarke, C. A. (2014). It's a Bittersweet Symphony, this Life: Fragile Academic Selves and Insecure Identities at Work. *Organization Studies*, 35(3), 335–357. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840613508396>
- Lee, K. (2020). Autoethnography as an Authentic Learning Activity in Online Doctoral Education: an Integrated Approach to Authentic Learning. *TechTrends* 64, 570–580. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-020-00508-1>
- Macfarlane, B. (2011). The Morphing of Academic Practice: Unbundling and the Rise of the Para-academic. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65(1), 59–73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2010.00467.x>
- Moran, E., & Misra, D. (2018). Professional doctorates: A pathway to legitimacy for non-academic HE professionals? *London Review of Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.16.1.08>
- Smith, C., Holden, M., Yu, E., & Hanlon, P. (2021). 'So what do you do?': Third space professionals navigating a Canadian university context. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2021.1884513>
- Stoltenkamp, J., van de Heyde, V., & Siebrits, A. (2017). The third-space professional: a reflective case study on maintaining relationships within a complex higher education institution. *Reflective Practice*, 18(1), 14–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2016.1214120>
- Veles, N. (2016). Imagining a future: changing the landscape for third space professionals in Australian higher education institutions. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 38(5), 519–533.
- Veles, N., Carter, M.-A., & Boon, H. (2019). Complex collaboration champions: university third space professionals working together across borders. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 23(2-3), 75–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2018.1428694>
- Whitchurch, C. (2008). Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of Third Space Professionals in UK Higher Education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(4), 377–396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2008.00387.x>
- Whitchurch, C. (2009). The rise of the blended professional in higher education: a comparison between the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. *Higher Education*, 58(3), 407–418. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9202-4>
- Whitchurch, C. (2012). *Reconstructing Identities in Higher Education: The Rise of 'Third Space' Professionals*. London: Taylor & Francis Group.

White, S., White, S., & Borthwick, K. (2021). Blended professionals, technology and online learning: Identifying a socio-technical third space in higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 75(1), 161–174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12252>

Zellweger Moser, F., & Bachmann, G. (2010). Editorial: Zwischen Administration und Akademie - Neue Rollen in der Hochschullehre. *Zeitschrift Für Hochschulentwicklung*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.3217/zfhe-5-04/01>

Acknowledgements

This paper draws on research undertaken as part of the Doctoral Programme in E-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. I wish to thank Dr Kyungmee Lee for her encouragement, support and guidance, and my reviewers, whose comments have helped me strengthen this paper.



About the author

Regina Obexer, M.Ed. is Senior Lecturer and Head, Center for Responsible Management & Social Impact at MCI | The Entrepreneurial School® (Austria). She has worked in online teaching & learning for two decades with a background in instructional design and digital competence development for students and educators. Her teaching and research interests are at the interface of digital learning and education for sustainable development and responsible management.

✉ Email: r.obexer@lancaster.ac.uk

ORCID: [0000-0002-2799-1284](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2799-1284)

🐦 Twitter: [@reginaobexer](https://twitter.com/reginaobexer)

Open Access (CC BY 4.0)

This article is distributed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence.



You are free to

- Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

Under the following terms:

- Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

The full licence conditions are available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

