Reconstructing Identities in Higher Education: The Emergence of *Third Space* Professionals

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Dr Celia Whitchurch

Lecturer in Higher Education

Institute of Education, University of London

c.whitchurch@ioe.ac.uk

www.ioe.ac.uk

Centre for Higher Education Studies

Leadership Foundation for Higher Education Studies

- *Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures* (2005-2007)

(www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.htm

- *Optimising the Potential of 'Third Space' Professionals in UK Higher Education* (January-December 2009)

(www.lfhe.ac.uk/research/smallprojects/ ioefinalreport.doc)

Third Space Contexts I

Literature on professional identities:
- Increased specialisation
- 'Professionalisation'
- Exclusion from academic community

Literature on academic identities
- Series of binaries:
    - Academic/'non-academic'
    - Collegial/managerial
- Exclusion from 'professional' agendas
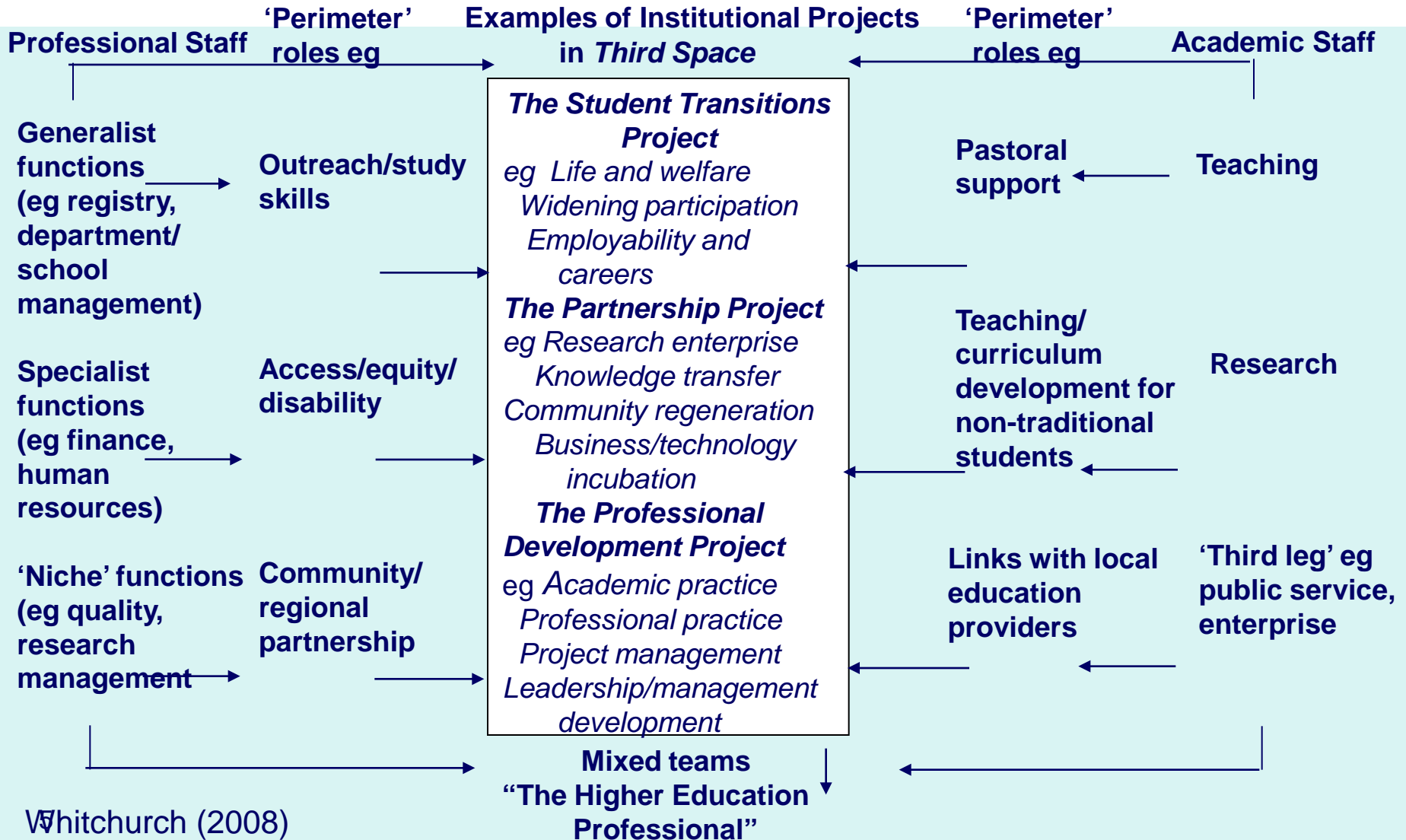
Third Space Contexts II

- Situation more complex and dynamic:
  - Increasingly diverse and mobile workforce
  - Partnership working (internal and external)
  - Blurring of boundaries
- New cadres of staff:
  - Professional staff with academic credentials
  - Academic staff with interests in projects such as widening participation, new modes of learning, and knowledge exchange/transfer

The Emergence of *Third Space*

Professional Staff — **'Perimeter' roles eg** — **Examples of Institutional Projects in *Third Space*** — **'Perimeter' roles eg** — **Academic Staff**

Generalist functions (eg registry, department/ school management)

Outreach/study skills

Specialist functions (eg finance, human resources)

Access/equity/ disability

'Niche' functions (eg quality, research management

Community/ regional partnership

The Student Transitions Project
eg Life and welfare
  Widening participation
  Employability and careers
The Partnership Project
eg Research enterprise
  Knowledge transfer
Community regeneration
  Business/technology incubation
The Professional Development Project
eg *Academic practice*
  Professional practice
  Project management
Leadership/management development

Pastoral support

Teaching

Teaching/ curriculum development for non-traditional students

Research

Links with local education providers

'Third leg' eg public service, enterprise

Mixed teams "The Higher Education Professional"

Whitchurch (2008)

Characterising *Third Space* professionals

Via:

- The spaces they occupy
- The knowledges they construct
- The relationships they form
- The legitimacies (sources of authority) they develop
- The languages they speak

Space(s) I

- Plural, dynamic space(s)
- Lack of clear organisational parameters
- Ambiguous conditions:
  - "Sometimes an academic unit, sometimes an office" (partnership manager)
  - Turning this to advantage…
  - Working with given structures for practical purposes, but also critiquing them (in public or private)

Space(s) II

- Safe space in which to creative/experiment

but also

- Lack of organisational checks and balances
- The 'dark side' of *Third Space*
- Sense of struggle, challenge and tension
- 'Counter cultures'?
  - "Secret managers" (Kehm 2006)
  - "Invisible workforce" (Rhoades 2009)

Knowledges I

- Applied, evidence–based Mode 2 knowledge eg research into recruitment trends, student outcomes

- Contextual/cross-boundary knowledge: "It's not enough just to know how to be able to be an accountant… or to manage staff... in order to be effective within a university you need to understand the context." (faculty manager)

Knowledges II

- Transforming 'information' into 'knowledge' via interpretation and presentation:
  - "My role isn't just to present data but to try to interpret data… through policy analysis… Timing, politics, the media you use, the way you communicate it, is probably even more important than the actual findings of an analysis" (institutional researcher)
- Higher education as an academic field (conferences, published papers…)

Relationships

- Lateral team working - less division between 'managers' and 'managed'
- People managing at earlier stage of careers
- People oriented, but challenged by managing staff
- 'Partnership' rather than 'management'?
- "if you get the relationships right everything else falls into place" (educational technologist)
- 'Weak ties'/networks (Granovetter 1974)

Legitimacies I

- Credibility likely to be built on a personal basis:
  - "There's no authority that you come with" (planning manager)
  - "It's what you are, not what you represent" (learning partnerships manager)
  - "… 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" (teaching and learning manager)

Legitimacies II

- Ability to participate in disinterested debate:
  - "learning to divorce argument from people" (teaching and learning manager)
- Anticipating likely responses:
  - Different academic/professional work "rhythms"
  - Applied, Mode 2 activity seen as "trade" or "dirty" work… (partnership manager(s))
  - Attitude of academic colleagues that "If you solve a problem for us, we'll come back and work with you again" (teaching and learning ₁₃manager)

Languages

- "you've got two different groups of people often talking two different languages" (teaching and learning manager)
- Multi-lingual, understanding and interpreting between eg educational, socio-economic, market discourses
- Being able to use language that will be understood and accepted by specific client group
- New language expressing contemporary agendas eg partnership, creativity, project work, teamwork, networking, institutional and professional development

Categories of *Third Space*

- Embedded
  - Integrated and recognised by institution
  - Possibility of bureaucracy/lack of autonomy
- Semi-detached
  - Independent but recognised by institution
  - Individual autonomy and responsibility
- Serendipitous
  - Arises in patches/not recognised by institution
  - Dependent on individuals who work round structures

Categories of *Third Space* professional

- '**Dedicated' professionals**
  - Saw themselves as staying in higher education, possibly moving between *Third Space* and either a professional or an academic role
- '**Portfolio' professionals**
  - Saw themselves as moving between higher education and other sectors eg government, public agencies, charities, business

Example: A Business and Industry Partnership Manager I

- Background in the commercial sector/own business
- Semi-detached, autonomous unit
- 'Portfolio' professional
- Built authority on success in attracting business to the university: "it's often easier to act and ask afterwards… because it's made money… nobody's actually complained".
- Customised in-house executive programmes for business and industry with bespoke curricula

A Business and Industry Partnership Manager II

- Brought together needs of academic staff/clients/community; public policy and market agendas:
- Local students progressed their careers (work based learning)
- Local businesses built capacity
- University contributed to regional development/rebuilding of skills base
- Academic staff developed research: "They weave in their research [into teaching], and through links with industry, we create [more] research projects".

A Business and Industry Partnership Manager III

- Understood industry contexts: "When industry says 'This is what we'd like to do' we… talk it through…"

- Multi-lingual: "part of our role is to help the academics understand what they are going into, [so] they are not phased by that environment".

- Invested in own staff: MBAs/doctorates; teaching opportunities, applied research, publications, conferences

- Built USP:"I'm trying to go deep into an industry; instead of having lots of partners we have a selected few, but carve a real expertise in that area…"

Implications for Individuals

- Autonomy/creativity but:
- More exposure to risk?
- How to get 'mainstream' experience (eg managing budgets/staff)?
- Inappropriate reporting lines…
- Status of *Third Space* work eg promotion criteria; rewards and incentives; career/professional development
- Career pathways: "I'm not sure what sort of professional I am any more…"

Implications for Institutions

- How to encourage creativity *and* maintain oversight?
- How to prevent projects:
  - Having a life of their own?
  - Being too dependent on one person (succession planning)?
- Risk of too many people crossing boundaries?
- Appropriate mix of identities/employment packages
- How to assess eg creativity, networking, partnership
- When and how to mainstream *Third Space* activity