

**Title:**                    **Leveraging ambiguity in the third space: Can we use Whitchurch's dimensions of blended professional activity to train and develop staff?**

**Presenter:**            **Steven White**  
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### **Session Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- understand the concept of third space and its relevance to educational developers and learning designers in contemporary HE
- evaluate the relevance of the concept of third space to their working context
- reflect on the extent to which they could apply or do apply third space dimensions of blended professional activity to achieve their goals or recruit and train others
- identify how 'architectural choice points' (determining selection of, access to, and configuration of technology) might shape working processes or define the roles of those involved in such processes

### **Session Outline**

Celia Whitchurch's influential concept of a 'third space' in higher education helps explain the complex and sometimes ambiguous roles of educational developers and learning designers in HE, whose 'blended professional' roles span conventional distinctions between professionals and academics. Whitchurch's research identifies particular dimensions of blended professional activity which afford practitioners in the third space the ability to significantly shape and define their own roles and those of others. These roles are carved out within "broadly based extended projects which are no longer containable within firm boundaries and have created new portfolios of activity" (Whitchurch, 2012, p. 25). Though research has frequently identified technology enhanced learning (TEL) initiatives as sites of third space activity (Whitchurch, 2012) or 'para-academic' roles (Macfarlane, 2011), the role of technology in shaping this emergent space has yet to be fully considered.

This paper prompts reflection on the role of technology within the third space in HE, drawing on the results of a multi-site case study (White, 2019) across three UK HE institutions involved in the production of Massive Open Online Courses. The findings of the study extend Whitchurch's ideas, identifying learning designers as 'blended professional hubs' of activity within a socio-technical third space. Within this space, learning designers are able to intertwine social and technical elements of course production to shape the roles of those involved and at times exercise an unspoken 'final say' over major project decisions (White, 2019). The discussion session builds on Sharpe (2017) work which explored the extent to which educational developers are "taking advantage of the freedoms that working in the third space provides". It provides an opportunity to reflect on how dimensions of blended professional activity might be leveraged to inform

recruitment, training, and development of staff working in third space roles, and the co-constructive role of technology in this space.

## Session Activities and Approximate Timings

1. Introduction and (online) student response system quiz to gauge roles and perceptions of participants on the issues to be discussed (e.g. 'the boundaries of my role are clearly drawn' (agree, partially agree, disagree), or 'my contract says I am a member of (a) *professional* (b) *academic* (c) *administrative* staff) **[5 minutes]**
2. Initial presentation - briefly outline the concept of third space in higher education, giving examples of the types of project which have been identified as characteristic of the third space in Whitchurch's work, and the dimensions of blended professional activity (spaces, knowledges, relationships, legitimacies) **[15 minutes]**
3. **Small group discussion question:**
  - a. To what extent do these dimensions of activity relate to your work? **[10 minutes]**
4. Once participants are familiarised with these dimensions of activity, **small group questions:**
  - a. To what extent might these dimensions might be used for staff recruitment or development?
  - b. In what ways might this be done? **[10 minutes]**
5. Introduce the concept of 'architectural choice points', explaining how technologies come to be embedded in their contexts of use. Using findings from my research, I provide prompts to think about how decisions relating to the following might shape the interactions and roles of those involved:
  - demands and expertise associated with different media use (e.g. video production, interactive learning objects)
  - types of resources used (copyright, currency, maintenance)
  - guidelines on branding or marketing of university materials
  - expectations regarding roles of learners and teachers **[5 minutes]**

## References

- Macfarlane, B. (2011). The Morphing of Academic Practice: Unbundling and the Rise of the Para-academic. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65(1), 59–73. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2010.00467.x/full>
- Sharpe, R. (2017). SWEET strategies for developers working in the third space. *Educational Developments*, 18(1), 1–5. Retrieved from [https://www.seda.ac.uk/resources/files/publications\\_213\\_Educational Developments 18.1 final.pdf](https://www.seda.ac.uk/resources/files/publications_213_Educational%20Developments%2018.1%20final.pdf)
- Whitchurch, C. (2012). *Reconstructing Identities in Higher Education: The Rise of "third Space" Professionals*.
- White, S. (forthcoming) *Learning designers and educators in the 'third space': the socio-technical construction of MOOCs in UK higher education*. PhD. University of Southampton.