

From Third Space Professional to First-Generation Academic: Navigating New Identities

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This chapter reflects on my transition from fresh graduate, student union bureaucrat, Learning Developer, and then to my first academic role as a Lecturer in Education Studies. I like to think of this as a story of perseverance, hard work and perhaps a smattering of good luck. More importantly, I think my story shows that there are multiple routes into an academic role, and increasingly, there is permeability between professional support roles within universities and the more traditional academic roles; and that gap might be smaller than we think.

1 The Journey to Academia

I think this story is best started at the beginning. I originally arrived at the University of Hull as an 18-year-old fresh out of school. I had come to university to study Geography so I could become a high school teacher and I intended to head straight from my first degree into a postgraduate teaching training programme. Like many other students (Bergmark et al., 2018), I was inspired by my own high school geography teacher and felt destined to become a teacher like him so I could inspire others to do the same. Destiny had other plans. For new graduates, an important aspect of applying for teacher training is to demonstrate experience of volunteering or working in a school (Department for Education, 2023). Such experience is a useful way to ensure that you know what you are getting into, and for me, volunteering in local high schools helped me to quickly realize that my passion for geography was not quite shared by the teenagers I was teaching. Not thrilled by the prospect of wrangling teenagers, or de-specializing to focus on the broader curriculum of school education, I was at a bit of a loss. For the younger version of me, this was an earth-shattering moment. If not a teacher, what would I do? Unsure of the answer, I escaped the problem by throwing myself into my university studies. Why think about the goal when you are enjoying the journey?

As a student, I took every opportunity to engage with my studies. I had read that extra-curricular activities led to better-rounded and more employable graduates (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Swingler et al., 2022), so I placed all my energy into being a good student. As well as working hard on my degree, I volunteered at the Student Union, became President of the Geography Society, and worked as a Course Representative to partner with academics to improve the student experience. University felt as though I belonged. It felt like home. And so, it was in the University of Hull's Geography Department that I now found role models: Professors Jonas, Atkinson, Holloway, Deutz, Haughton and Eden. I slowly came to realize I did not want to be a geography *teacher*; I wanted to become a geography *lecturer*. As a first-generation scholar, the first person in my family to go to university (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Roksa et al., 2018), I had literally no idea where to start. Doctorates, funding, research, postdoctoral roles-- it all felt quite insurmountable, and it was.

At graduation, despite achieving a first-class in my BA Geography degree and gaining the support of academics, I was unable to obtain elite doctoral funding. Driven by this experience, I started my career working in higher education, focusing on roles that helped me engage with widening participation, inclusion, and student voice. I first started in Hull University's Student Union as an Education, Policy and Research Co-ordinator. In this role, I engaged with university quality assurance processes and led the course representation system to ensure student voice was at the heart of everything we did. This was a distinctly professional role, and I engaged with few tasks in the academic space. While I enjoyed the role, it felt very far from the academic role I coveted. It did, however, enable me to build and maintain my network at the University as I had returned just a few months after my undergraduate graduation. The University of Hull rapidly became "home," and somewhere that I wanted to develop my career.

After two years' working for the student union, I came to the point in my career where I wanted to directly impact widening participation. When the opportunity arose, I pivoted towards working as a Learning Developer, based in the University Library. In this role, I directly supported students in developing their academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006) and study skills. As is typical for Learning Developers (Hilsdon, 2011), I supported students via personal appointments, bookable workshops and embedded classes delivered in the curriculum. Such embedded sessions were often in partnership with disciplinary academics, helping me further build my networks within the institution. I also engaged in scholarly activity, undertaking research and presenting at conferences.

While my everyday work was academic-related, as a Learning Developer, I was socially and contractually non-academic. Yet, in practice, I would engage in many activities associated with academic roles: teaching, research, and scholarship. In essence, I was occupying the "third space" that sits between the professional and the academic, encompassing staff that cannot be characterized by traditional "academic" or "non-academic" labels (Whitchurch, 2008; 2015). The massification of higher education (Becher & Trowler, 2001) has led to a growth in third space roles (Whitchurch, 2015). Yet, such roles often sit in a "borderland" and struggle to gain recognition and legitimacy (Guerin, 2021). I now write as someone who has sat within the non-academic, the third space and the academic. This chapter reflects on my journey across these shifting professional identities, acknowledging that at times, the third space is a frustrating place to be.

2 My Third Space Journey to Academia

This section overviews my journey through the third space to my first academic role, having spent ten years (almost to the day) working as a Learning Developer at the University. Throughout much of this time, my focus was on becoming better at my role. This was not a career-focused decision but was centred on being able to better help students. Because my geography degree did not best place me for my role, for this reason, in my spare time, I completed a Postgraduate Certificate in eLearning which enabled me to understand online pedagogies and build new online learning opportunities for students. More importantly, this programme introduced me to a new literature from that of my undergraduate studies, helping me to gain an appreciation for the variety of approaches to learning in higher education. As I began to understand foundational learning theories and pedagogy in higher education, I applied this learning to my practice. Eventually, I used my experience working as a Learning Developer to gain Fellowship of Advance HE, a member-led higher education body in the United Kingdom that works to improve higher education for all stakeholders. Fellowship recognizes professional values, core knowledge and areas of activity that demonstrate a commitment to teaching, learning, and the student experience (Advance HE, 2023). Although happy with my progress, I wanted more challenge.

When the University of Hull launched an Educational Doctorate (EdD) programme, it provided me the perfect opportunity. While I had not been able to get any funding as a fresh graduate, the part-time EdD route provided me an affordable way to self-fund the doctorate. It was also very convenient, allowing me to study at the institution at which I was working. For me, this was not about progression to an academic role but rather about knowing what I was capable of and being better able to support students. I used my EdD to fuse my interests in education and geography, focusing my research on how the University Library was experienced and used by students which enabled me to make a professional contribution to knowledge and also to develop my profile within the University. All this was possible as I had a phenomenally supportive line manager and colleagues. While I may have been self-funding the studies, I received time, help, access, and ethics support to make everything possible. I cannot underestimate how important that support was for my success.

The doctorate was only a part of my academic journey. Alongside my studies and research, I became more involved with the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE), and I began to develop leadership skills in the field. By 2019, I was recognized both as a Certified Leading Practitioner in Learning Development and a Senior Fellow of Advance HE. A year later, I was even more thrilled to defend my thesis and, in 2020, a few weeks later, I finalized my five-and-a-half-year doctoral journey. My perseverance had paid off and it felt amazing, being the first in my family to go to university and complete

a doctorate. That just did not happen to people like me, from a family with no experience of university and from a neighbourhood with low participation in higher education.

I graduated feeling very refreshed. I had achieved a long-held dream, and I had done it myself. After studying part-time for so many years, I also emerged into a very different world ... one with the free time for me to do things, but also a world wracked from a pandemic that had a significant impact on higher education (Sharaievska et al., 2022; Watermeyer et al., 2021). The freedom from the completion of my studies meant I was able to focus on my practice instead of my doctoral studies.

I began to work on online guidance to support learners during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Fallin, 2021a) and the use of YouTube as an asynchronous instruction platform (Fallin, 2021b). I also continued to develop my work around supporting diverse learners which was an approachable way to ensure universal design for learning resources (Fallin et al., 2023; Fallin & Tomlinson, 2022). As I look back on my time in the third space, I can see how I was starting to further engage in scholarly research and develop my publication profile, foundations that would later help me as an academic.

Ultimately, this was further blurring the boundaries between my professional role as a Learning Developer and the duties traditionally associated with academic positions. This situation was challenging as I had to navigate systems that were either non-existent or that were simply not designed for people in my non-academic role. For example, in conducting research, I needed to ensure I had ethical approval; yet, there was no system to manage this in professional services. As such, I had to negotiate access to ethical approval via a university faculty. There were also issues with intellectual property, copyright and institutional policies only written for those in academic roles, leaving me in unclear territory. While there were no direct barriers stopping me, it was all a bit frustrating.

The most formative experience for my career development came in September 2021. I was starting my Postgraduate Certificate of Academic Practice (PCAP); and I engaged a number of colleagues to conduct peer observations which was a required for assessment. My first peer observation was conducted by an academic colleague while I was teaching their students about critical thinking in my role as a Learning Developer. A few days later, I met with my colleague to receive their feedback and that conversation proved to be a turning point in my career. They discussed how effective my session was and highlighted areas of good practice. We talked more generally about what I was doing, and the conversation turned to my career development. My colleague asked what was next, and if I was seeking academic promotion. To this day, I still remember the shock on their face when I told them it was not an option. My professional services contract meant no academic promotion was possible. I went on to explain that if I wanted to progress, only two options were available: Either I must go into management or I must leave my position and become an academic. My colleague made an acute observation; progression would either lock my skills into a management role or into a single department as an academic. This really got me thinking about my next career steps.

Reflecting on my doctorate and nine years of experience as a Learning Developer, I realized realize that these experiences were not really valued in the context of my third space professional services contract or any career options that might arise from it. In fairness, it is widely acknowledged that the third space can be a challenging place for career development (Akerman, 2020). As the issues of recognition, progression, or promotion are identified as common weaknesses of most third space roles (Karaus & Zurhellen, 2023; Whitchurch, 2023). This is not just one institution's problem.

The more I reflected on this, the more I came to realize the injustice of it. I had come so far with both my qualifications and professional recognition, and yet I was stuck in the same role. Even worse, when I tried to engage in the scholarship expected of someone with a doctorate, I found structural barriers because of my contract. This is not so much a critique of the third space, but a reflection of the problems from academic-professional role blurring. My role was not designed to facilitate academic activities that fall outside the purview of faculties. Ultimately, this is not an institutional problem, but more of a reflection that I might have outgrown my current role.

My peer's observation helped me realize that after self-funding my doctorate, I had a choice of how to use it. If I stayed in Learning Development, I would have to move into management in order to advance, ultimately doing less of what I was good at and less of what I enjoyed. There is nothing wrong with this

route, and the fact it exists demonstrates that there is some form of progression opportunity; but it was not for me. My alternative (thanks to the doctorate) was a pivot towards an academic career which would gain me opportunities for academic promotion, access to research support, and recognition for my scholarship.

Ultimately, it was this second route I chose, spurred by a tranche of roles at my existing institution. I applied and I was successful. I accepted the role of Lecturer in Education Studies, and in doing so, my career trajectory had taken its third turn. While the change was significant in role, I did not have to move far, as the role I accepted was within the same department in which I had done my doctorate at the University of Hull.

3 Becoming an Academic

A key concept in higher education is that of the hidden curriculum; that is, the implicit and untaught behaviours, knowledge, and norms that students require for success (Hubbard et al., 2020). As both a Learning Developer and an academic, I've tried to expose the hidden curriculum and support students by uncovering as many norms as I can. However, as I reflect on my start in an academic role, I realized there is also a hidden curriculum for lecturers. As I think more on this, it is easy to see why. The language, social structures, processes, and power relations of academic roles are hardly covered in the job description, and other authors have also argued there is a distinct curriculum to being a lecturer (Hafler et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2015). We learn some of these hidden rules during our experience as students, especially during the doctoral phase, though the disparity between first generation doctoral students and those with family experience of doctoral studies demonstrates the hidden depth to many of these rules (Roksa et al., 2018). Most of these rules, however, are dependent on induction, mentorship, or just figuring it out as you go along when in the position. The importance of figuring it out cannot be underestimated given that research shows universities are generally weak at academic induction (Billot & King, 2017). In my case, I had made an internal move, and so my induction was already taken care of. While I had not been in an academic position, my professional services role was closely allied, and so the systems, processes, and people were not new to me. Now that I am in an academic role, I can appreciate how much of a head start this gave me, and how much is not communicated to those academic newcomers to life in higher education.

As I reflect on my move from the third space to my role as a lecturer within the same university, I found the initial switch surprisingly easy. I was perhaps lucky in that I had worked in the third space for so long; I had picked up on many of the unwritten rules of being a lecturer. As framed by Hubbard et al. (2020, p. 60), I understood the "rules of the game." This was further supported by having completed my PCAP while in my professional role, a qualification most lecturers do within their two years of teaching. Having served on multiple faculty learning, teaching, and student experience committees for years, I was well aware of the challenges and that also left few surprises. Having worked at the institution for many years before my academic role cushioned my transition to a great extent, giving me a head start in the academic role.

While the start was easier than expected, I should also reflect on how I had taken a significant risk in taking on my new role. I was leaving a permanent contract in Learning Development to start as a Lecturer in Education Studies on a precarious two-year contract. The gain for me was the academic contract and the recognition and promotion opportunities it provided without needing to go into a library or Learning Development leadership role. I should be clear; this risk was all mine. I could have stayed in my secure job, but, as outlined above, I had wanted that next challenge, and I wanted better opportunities to use my doctorate. As the main wage earner, I felt a lot of pressure on performance to secure that coveted permanent role, or even to move institutions should that be necessary.

Given this context, I questioned if this had been the right move and if I had found the right place for me. I think the biggest shock came from the reality of it all. Academic positions are coveted, and I had made it into one of them. That dream I had as an undergraduate was realized, although not in the area that my 18-year-old self had expected. While I acknowledge their terminology as problematic, I have always had an affinity for Trowler et al.'s (2012) framing of *Tribes and Territories in the 21st Century: Rethinking the significance of disciplines in higher education*. Academic fields and the departments around them can be

very territorial. It took time for me, once in the role, to realize that I had, indeed, found my “tribe.” For me, it was more than just academic knowledge and experience.

As I reflect on my journey, I see I had wholeheartedly committed to causes aligned with my new role in (the broader) field of education. My Learning Development role was an obvious part of this, but my broader professional and life experiences had helped too. I have been a Chair and Deputy Chair of Governors at numerous schools in the city (and still maintain my role at three schools). My husband and I had adopted three children, requiring not only a long engagement with social care, but also training in childhood development and trauma-informed parenting. I am also a trustee of a local charity that focuses on supporting local community organizations. On reflection, the surprise for me is that it was my broader life experience that aligned with my academic tribe almost as much as my qualifications. The more I think about this, the more I realize I have indeed found the right place for me.) I had achieved the “sense of belonging.”

4 Comparing Two Worlds

I am navigating new identities as I emerge from the third space and into an academic role. As I write this chapter, I have just completed my first full year as an academic, and I am still navigating that transition. On a daily basis, I do many similar things to what I did in learning development. I teach and support students and I develop my scholarship and research. It is with some irony, perhaps, that the most different aspects of my new academic role are not academic. Firstly, I engage with multiple administrative duties in my role as a programme director and module leader. Secondly, I support students with non-academic personal (pastoral) matters as a personal supervisor. These are the kind of duties that Whitchurch (2008, p. 385) frames as “perimeter roles” to the third space; yet, for me, they are the signatures of my transition to an academic role. This is very different to what I imagined as the characteristics of an academic role. This following section will afford a greater exploration of this transition in identity, drawing on both my journal and blog posts along the way; and on three key themes of this transition, student connection, scholarship, and academic decisions.

5 Student Connections, Scholarship, and Academic Decisions

In starting as a new lecturer, the biggest thing for me was the human element of connection. Given my broader professional experience, I quickly realized my new colleagues shared many of my interests and values. The day before I started teaching in my new role, I captured the following reflection in my personal blog:

What I am looking forward to the most is the opportunity to work with the same group of students beyond a single session. As a Learning Developer, I would see students ... across every discipline. While this diversity was always fun—I would see so many people that it was impossible to learn names, see progression or develop those positive learner-staff relationships that build community. As a lecturer, personal supervisor and research supervisor, there will be opportunities for this. (2022a)

It would later be this connection that became a signature of my transition. A month later I commented:

I'm really beginning to get to know some of the students, what motivates them and what their research interests are. As I've mentioned, we have a very international cohort, which has provided me with excellent opportunities to learn more about different educational systems. I'm so impressed with the passion and drive these students have, and I can't wait to see what they do. (2022c)

As I reflect on this a year later, connection was the most significant difference between my professional and academic roles. As a third space professional, I was a conveyor of students but had little opportunity for connection. Many students I would see only once during their studies –most, a handful of times. Either way, I would never know if these students were successful or if I had impacted their studies. There were rare opportunities for feedback, and even they could feel hollow. One graduation day, a student introduced me to their parents and claimed that I had supported their degree success. I had no idea who that student was – I could not remember them from the sea of faces I had seen that year. By contrast, as a lecturer, I work with a much smaller pool of students. I know their names, I know who they are, where they want to go; I know their achievements. To symbolize all of all of this, I keep a photo on my phone. It is a selfie of my tutor group from one of the modules: a little bit of community that I never found in the third space.

The next significant point of comparison is that of scholarship. As discussed above, I was active in scholarship in my role in the third space, but much of this was on my own time, and required me to navigate systems not created for me. This is easier on the academic side where scholarship is an expectation and not an addition. There is support, policies, and structures to help with this. More importantly, however, there is time. I have been able to apply for funding –so far, without success, but I have nevertheless had the time and support to engage with this aspect of academic life. One of the more interesting features of my scholarship is that I am still active in Learning Development. This has allowed me to make the most of my expertise but approach it as an academic researcher as opposed to an active practitioner. As I reflected in my blog:

Ironically, even though I have 'left' Learning Development, I've had more time for Learning Development scholarship this last few weeks than I have done in years. Don't get me wrong—I've not got time to burn, but I have some scholarship time in my workload. That's never happened explicitly before. (2022c)

Scholarship goes beyond just research and writing. I am now a member of two working groups for ALDinHE, including serving as an Editor for the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*. I would never have had time for this as a Learning Developer. This year, I have also been able to contribute to multiple book chapters as well as publishing a couple of articles. All of this would have been impossible were it not for my academic role providing me with the time and space to do this.

The final thing I want to reflect upon is that of academic decisions. This is a definitive difference between the professional and the academic as those working in third space roles often need to defer certain items for “academic decisions.” Academic decisions include assessments, grading, student progression, allowances, and awards. Such decisions, therefore, are characteristic of the professional-academic divide. From my experience as a new academic, core academic decisions involve marking and feedback – the grading of assessments. As I reflected upon in my blog:

Marking assessments is an essential part of the academic cycle, and the provision of summative feedback helps students to develop moving forwards. I always missed not being part of that. It feels like one of the significant differences between many third space professionals and academics. (2022b)

Marking is often framed as an unpopular activity for academics, but it is something I relish. While I had supported assessment as a Learning Developer, I was never involved in this final academic decision. While I accept that assessment is an emotional labour (Henderson-Brooks, 2021), for me, it is also an opportunity to see how my students have done. It also gives me some of the closure that I never received in my professional services role: I can see if I am having an impact on student achievement.

6 The Role a Year Later: Reflections for Others

I hope this chapter shows how I have absolutely loved my career transition. After a few months into my academic role, I applied for the Programme Director (course leader) position for our seven new master's courses and was successful in being selected; taking on this responsibility has been an amazing opportunity for me as an early career academic, making the most of both my academic and professional services experience. Over the last six weeks, I've marked 480,000 words across 22 master's dissertations, written two book chapters, edited 14 journal articles in my role as an editor, and designed hours of teaching in support of new modules; and as a Programme Director, I have just launched seven new masters' programmes. Suffice to say, I feel that I have arrived as an academic, and I think this is not a bad place to be at the end of my first full year.

I think that there is often a chasm portrayed between the academic and professional roles that sit in the third space. Although I have experienced that that chasm is real, hallmarked by contractual terms, scholarship time, and the freedom (or requirement) to make "academic decisions," I believe my work as a Learning Developer has given me a monumental head start into my academic career, thus suggesting the chasm may be smaller than I first thought.

7 In Conclusion

In closing, I here distil my learning and advice for others. As noted in this chapter, these are the characteristics of this transition. This is *my* key learning:

- 1) **Do not give up.** My dreams of a doctorate and an academic role were dashed soon after my undergraduate degree. But, I made it!
- 2) **There are more ways into an academic career than you think.** When I started out in the Student Union and later in the library, I never dreamed an academic role was possible. It definitely was.
- 3) **There is a significant hidden curriculum in being an academic.** There are so many unwritten rules. I am grateful for the experiences in the third space that made the transition easier.
- 4) **It is okay to question a career move.** Change is always scary, but it is okay to question your decision.

In sum, there is a good potential for achievement as an early career academic. Whereas many people may sit back and feel the need to take the time to learn and others may run in too eagerly, stepping on toes, there is a balance to be struck. I like to think that the place where I am at now demonstrates that the best of both worlds can be achieved.

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