

CASE STUDY

Third Space Partnerships with Students: Becoming Educational Together

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ABSTRACT

This case study discusses how we harnessed a University Teaching Fellowship to open a collective third space partnership with “non-traditional” students to enable them to draw on their experiences of transition into higher education and to produce resources designed to help other students find their place, voice, and power at university. We discuss first the “in-between” opportunities of learning development as a “third space profession” that enables us to work in creative partnership with students. We further set the scene by exploring the third space potential of learning development per se and then examine the successful development and administration of a learning development module, *Becoming an Educationist*, at a medium-sized university in the United Kingdom. We conclude by arguing for third space partnerships not just alongside the curriculum, but in and through the curriculum as well.

KEYWORDS

third space, partnership, students as partners, learning development, higher education

We work in the United Kingdom in what is called a widening participation institution, that is, we reach out to and recruit those that do not normally experience a university education. This case study discusses how we utilised the “in-between” opportunities of learning development to work with students as partners in a collective third space (Gutiérrez, 2008). We set the scene by exploring the third space potential of learning development per se (Whitchurch, 2008), teasing out the additional benefits when given the opportunity to develop and run a learning development module, *Becoming an Educationist* (which we will refer to as *Becoming* in this case study). Our final focus will be on the collective third space created when five of our *Becoming* students produced resources to enhance the learning experience of other students.

In *Becoming*, we employed creative and ludic practice (Winnicott, 1971) to create a third space akin to that created by Gutiérrez (2008) with the same emphasis on “redesigning what counts as teaching and learning of literacy” (p. 148) that honoured our non-traditional students for the people they already were as they engaged in the process of becoming the academics that they wanted to be. We posit that it is this approach that enables students to find their own voices in the exclusionary, competitive, and often hostile higher education environment (viz. Abegglen, Burns, & Sinfield, 2014; Abegglen, Burns, & Sinfield, 2015).

This case study discusses what happened when we recruited students who had successfully completed *Becoming* to take part in our University Teaching Fellowship (UTF) funded project to produce empowering resources for other students like themselves. There was an explicit social justice agenda to the project overall, one where the particular experiences and voices of our students would be valued and where they would work in partnership with each other and with us. We outline the pressure placed upon those students who generously committed to such extracurricular third space activity on top of all the academic work with which they had to engage. We conclude by critically discussing such endeavours while strongly supporting the idea of third space learning that creates “true partnerships” within and through—as well as alongside—the curriculum.

LEARNING DEVELOPMENT AND THIRD SPACE OPPORTUNITIES

Learning development sits in the space between academic and professional practice, between staff and students, and between educational institutions and employers (Whitchurch, 2008). This liminal work involves “teaching, tutoring, research, and the design and production of learning materials, as well as involvement in staff development, policy-making, and other consultative activities (Hilsdon, 2011, p. 14). Thus, learning development is a “third space” profession (Whitchurch, 2008) in the way that it “works in partnership” with students (Association for Learning Development in Higher Education, 2018; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014) where students and staff actively engage in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2014).

The five values of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) (2018) particularly place learning development professionals in “partnership” and in “emancipatory relationships” with students (para. 4). The connection between learning developers (LDers) and students are bottom up and not top down. That is, the relationship is not defined by the tutor and their curriculum or other goals; rather, LDers start with where the student is and not where the professional sees a “need” or where management see a “gap.” Thus, a student appearing in a typical one-to-one session has not arrived to be “fixed” but will bring an assignment to discuss. The LDer is not there to tell the student how to do the work “properly,” but to listen, to discuss, and to work with the student to decode the assignment and decide how to tackle it with understanding and power. This dialogic encounter (Bakhtin, 1981) “flattens” the hierarchies of the relationship, creating something much more porous and much more welcoming: a space of opportunities. This co-created space has third space potential—the potential for something to happen that is other than the traditional top-down hierarchical lecturer-student relationship or the add-on learning support provided by other education stakeholders.

Soja's (1996) theorization of third space and Shields' (2004) analysis of Henri Lefebvre's work (2003; 1991) reveal the liberatory potential of the space occupied by LDers and students. It is a space where the negative striations of normal academic power relations can be swept away (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)—together, student and LDer can (re)define the space and can inhabit it more powerfully. Webster (2018) describes this as a space where boundaries are fuzzy and malleable, and hence a space that can expand and morph to accommodate the needs of those involved as well as those of the broader environment. It is a space occupied with students and, at its best, it is defined by joint goals and outcomes. In that sense our *Becoming* module and the UTF third space partnership project both operated as physical but also as more metaphorical spaces for action (Freire, 1970) fostering “real” partnerships (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), partnerships that re-envision students and staff as active collaborators in teaching and learning.

BECOMING THIRD SPACE PARTNERS: THE MODULE AS THIRD SPACE

A transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened. (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 152)

All the students that we invited to participate in the UTF project had taken our module, *Becoming an Educationist*, which we had created as far as possible to be a third space opportunity even bounded as it was by curricular constraints. *Becoming* was a compulsory first-year undergraduate module that had assessed work; however, there was much fluidity and choice with respect to the assignments offered within that module (Abegglen, Burns, & Sinfield, 2016). Students could devise their own projects and qualitative research study, and their final meta-reflection could take as radical a form as they wished. Indeed, one of the UTF participants had produced her final “essay” as a newsletter designed to help other students make sense of university study. Thus, *Becoming* was, similar to the residential program designed by Gutiérrez (2008), “a collective Third Space, in which students begin to reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish academically and beyond” (p. 148).

We wanted the students to enjoy their *Becoming* projects and tasks, and engage in peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher learning while using the opportunities these partnerships created for their own learning and development, as well as for that of others. We also invited students to engage in wider university projects and initiatives, including the UTF project covered in this case study and described in more detail below.

THE UTF PROJECT: STUDENTS AS PARTNERS IN THIRD SPACE

The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation and representation of meaning. (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211)

Five students who had been part of our *Becoming* module were invited to take part in the UTF project to produce resources designed to help other students transition successfully into the university. Four of the students, two male and two female, were second-year (Level 5) students at the time of engaging in the project. The fifth was a third-year (Level 6) student. The

latter had taken the administrative lead in organising Get Ahead, our annual student conference (see <https://www.facebook.com/GetAheadCon/>) the previous year, with the other four as his team. These five students were all non-traditional students, students who had work and care commitments beside their study. Their time in and for the university was limited. Despite this, the students were keen to take part in the project to support others with their learning. For example, one student commented that “it is always a privilege to be asked to produce something that other students could look at and use,” and another remarked that “the project became very enjoyable, particularly once I had managed to submit my assignments.”

With UTF, we wanted to create a third space project that promoted equity and social justice. We respected our students as academic actors who “counted” (Potter & McDougall, 2017) and who could draw on their own autobiographical and contextual specificities (Gutiérrez, 2008) to design their own form of emancipatory resources to enable other students to see things differently and to take action in their own learning (Freire, 1970). Our students typically have experienced educational rebuff and tend to have lower self-efficacy than middle-class students from a traditional university (Soria & Bultmann, 2014). We wanted to work differently with our students (Cairns, Hervey, & Johnson, 2018): in partnership and collaboration. We wanted the students to articulate and to define the project outcomes. Hence, the project success was not defined by a grade point, but by the students and their particular goals. This created a learning and teaching space that fostered co-production and exchange (Potter & McDougall, 2017)—a collective third space and a collaborative learning experience.

Specifically, we asked participating students to consider what the transition into higher education had been like for them as non-traditional students—as mature students, students with a working-class background, students from ethnic minorities, those with specific learning needs, students with substantial commitment in regards to work and care, and students that had little or no prior relationship to higher education and its demands. They were tasked with creating empowering resources that would help other non-traditional students find their feet in academia. We did not define what shape or form these resources should take, just that their end goal was to help other students develop a sense of their own power, voice, and efficacy. We also asked the students to compile journals reflecting on their travels through the project itself, and we invited the students to use our office for monthly meetings to touch base with us and support each other. Their lively meetings and the pleasure that they took in the project was heartening for us, as was the positive way they embraced the challenge:

I felt elated and excited that I was considered and chosen out of so many students; however, at the same time, I felt apprehensive: I wasn't sure if I could commit to a project and keep up to date with my assessments. When thinking about the project, my initial thoughts were - can I come up with an idea that would be useful for other students to use on their journey through university? (UTF student)

For me that was a very good experience. In the sense that I had the opportunity to attend the Learning and Teaching Conference to showcase our work. To me, that was perfect. I will never forget that. (UTF student)

This partnership model was not students merely developing resources and ensuring “student voice” in goal- and outcome-oriented higher education institutions. Such models of partnership are critiqued by Healey and Healey (2018) because although the power shifts from academics to students, it still resides with the higher education institution and its curricular or learning outcome goals. Rather, in the UTF project, we were adopting a “shared responsibility for teaching and learning” (International Journal for Students as Partners, n. d.) with the students driving the process, in partnership with other students and us, their lecturers. That is, the students were asked to harness their own particular knowledge and experience bases and apply them to new concepts and contexts to produce learning and teaching resources for social justice outcomes.

The UTF came with a small grant and we dedicated all of those funds to create bursaries for the students participating. Although the sums were small, we wanted to acknowledge the students as colleagues and honour the labour they were providing—knowing that our students had limited time and funds for their study:

When I agreed to be part of the Project, I did not know that there was a bursary involved; but it was just nice that you valued our work that much, to the point where you decided that we should get something out of it. (UTF student)

PROJECT OUTCOMES: ERUPTIONS AND DISRUPTIONS

Over a period of one academic year, the five participating students produced a series of digital resources that could be shared inside and outside the university, including at our own Learning and Teaching Conference.

These resources ranged from video diary entries produced by the participants, to video interviews with other students in the university, to small digital artefacts covering everything from mental health to how to prepare a presentation or how to study more creatively. All resources produced are open access and were uploaded on a specifically created video platform: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnYK-1wvs1MwgzIQ408OVSw/videos>.

Feedback has been very positive from both academic staff and other students. The resources have been used in teaching across the university in various disciplines and settings, by staff and our Success Coaches.

All the participating students themselves were proud to have been part of the UTF project: “This really felt like being a proper student,” commented one participant. At the same time, it was apparent that the project itself had taken a toll:

After committing to this project, I found that it was extremely difficult to commit to a task that will last until the end of the academic year. Although while participating in this project was greatly educational, I found that to be able to consistently contribute ideas and to be reflective throughout, to be challenging. This was due to the pressures of submitting assignments, keeping up to date with reading and also to maintain other commitments e.g. family. (UTF student)

I felt extremely anxious and pressured about attending group meetings and presenting legitimate ideas/suggestions. Moreover, the pressure of the assignments alongside the project deadlines had given me immense anxiety. I felt overwhelmed, and somewhat embarrassed of my inability to thrive in something I am so passionate about. It was only until the deadline for this project was extended that I managed to produce my artefact. (UTF student)

I was overwhelmed—I struggled to keep my head above water. I had numerous assessments and family commitments that were taking all my time. Time was running out, and I felt that I was not contributing as I would have liked to. However, my plan was never give up. I said that I would be part of the project, and I intended to continue until the end. (UTF student)

These were students with family and work commitments, alongside the pressure caused by their initial lack of familiarity with university teaching and learning. As they engaged with the UTF, we saw joy turning to pressure and guilt; we saw them torn by conflicting pressures: should they undertake their study work, work for a wage, or finish the resources for this project? As time passed and academic pressures mounted, our students worried that the time given to this project would negatively impact on their coursework and on their grades as well as their part-time job and family. Indeed, two out of the five involved in the UTF project intermitted the following year, formally dropping out of university, with the intention of returning after a break.

This highlights a tension between the project goals, outcomes, and personal experience. There was a strong feeling of success, which came at a high personal cost. Speaking with participating students—and looking at the journals and diaries they have produced—we question whether it is right to put so much additional extra-curricular pressure on non-traditional students especially when considering the challenging study-life situations they experience, even if these projects are set up with the best of intentions and give students as much agency as possible. We therefore wonder if we need instead to build more third space modules, as we attempted with *Becoming*, in order to create more holistic—and humanistic (Rogers, 1969)—learning and teaching experiences that are fully integrated into the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Mix tape: caution: this tape contains mixed feelings. (UTF student)

We attempted to create third space partnerships within our first-year undergraduate *Becoming an Educationist* module. We hoped that this module would foster students' self-confidence and extend and enhance what they thought about themselves and what they could achieve at university. We also hoped that the module would give them the courage to value themselves and their experiences and to actively participate in the academic community. Hence, when given the opportunity, we used UTF funding to create a project in which some of these students could expand on their skills and knowledge and work in partnership with us as third space professionals to create resources to help other students. However, two out the five

students we recruited for the UTF project subsequently intermitted their studies, unable to continue to balance the complex demands of university, paid employment, and family life.

Given that the third space is the space of potentiality, of the liminal and the unmapped; given that it is the street fighting and nomadic space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of education, we would argue that it is essential that all students are given the sorts of third space opportunities that we have described here in our case study and that are doubtless discussed elsewhere in this Journal. Moreover, we argue that it is especially essential for the so-called “non-traditional” student to have the opportunity to take up these opportunities. These students are the ones who persistently experience educational rebuff, who are labelled as deficit and stereotyped as “less than”; these are the students for whom we attempted to create third space opportunities both within our *Becoming* module and the UTF project. However, these are the very students who whilst they make the time for projects such as these—and they do—pay the highest price for taking that time away from their formal academic studies.

We therefore argue for a paradigm shift in UK higher education teaching and learning. What non-traditional students—and all students—deserve and need is a form of *Becoming* module at every level of their university study: third spaces within the curriculum; socio-political spaces that challenge, extend and explore the very nature of knowledge itself; spaces that nurture those more creative and life-enhancing activities; spaces that continue to value the people our students are as well as the academics they are becoming.

Those of us “in-between professionals” (Whitchurch, 2008) are well placed to offer and create such spaces and we should grab the opportunity to utilise third space, alongside, but importantly within the curriculum, to work in partnership with our students, with other staff and other third space professionals to stretch the boundaries of what is possible.

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