Academic support as a 'third space': a team's reflection on post-pandemic practice

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Abstract

This paper describes and reflects upon the re-organisation of academic support across a department of architecture, art and design within a British post-92 university drawing on the concept of 'third space' in relation to student success. Both the department and the institution are committed to social justice, widening participation and academic success. With the introduction of online support during the pandemic and a new team of colleagues, an opportunity arose to revise how academic support was delivered to undergraduate students. For this team, which includes academic mentors and an academic manager, the COVID-19 pandemic brought challenges that impacted our historical delivery of academic support, requiring us to redefine our service to students and colleagues in the light of student success and inspired by the concept of the 'third space'. This paper reflects upon the changes we made, as a case study, with reference to quantitative data, students' feedback and Whitchurch's (2009) framework of knowledges, legitimacies and relationships for blended professionals.

Keywords: third space; student success; academic mentors; relationships, compassion, awarding gap, academic support, knowledge, legitimacies.

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, when Celia Whitchurch set out to define the third space within higher education, many of us working in the realms of academic advising, student retention and student wellbeing have been able to recognise ourselves as critical practitioners whose role is to resist and challenge university hegemonies as we draw attention to pedagogical barriers or marginalised knowledges (Whitchurch, 2009; Hall,

2022). More recently, the work of McIntosh and Nutt (2022) has highlighted the way in which third-space working positively contributes to student success while suggesting that more could be done to look at this in practice, not least because the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted academia irrevocably with respect to university strategies and structures. Hall (2022) has even argued that third-space working should move centre-stage in a post-pandemic landscape because the future success of universities lies in their emphasis on integrated practice, partnership and problem-solving (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022).

As a small team of academic mentors in a creative arts department at a widening participation institution, we were certainly moved by the global health crisis of 2020 to reconsider how we delivered academic support in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) on a mass scale. Pre-pandemic, our work was more on the periphery of student success but with the new hybridity that e-learning brought with it, there became a greater need for our practices and shared knowledge to be more visible to both students and staff. Already 'quasi-academic' in our roles, the team holds, between its five members, over two decades of academic and professional interest in how the university defines, shapes, supports and celebrates student success through the provision of academic support. Being placed at the intersections of professional, pastoral and academic roles, often with an eye to the complexities of our institutions because we recognise that these are not simple educational structures, has also meant being what McIntosh and Nutt (2022, p.2) describe as a 'constant challenge to the organising principles of the academy'. We do that primarily by trying to see the university from the perspective of the student, and particularly, those interested in the creative disciplines. We aim to build common ground by threading together the many academic and professional experiences they encounter in order to demonstrate that the university is a space where students will grow and thrive as independent learners. The COVID-19 pandemic created a bigger demand for our practices and strategies, even when we, ourselves, were not necessarily able to define them in precise terms. Fortunately, this was not for long because, in 2022, we observed the arrival of national numerical thresholds to measure student success in higher education (Kernohan, 2022). These measures, arguably, provided our team with an opportunity to highlight our contribution to student success by providing evidence of impact. Furthermore, during the pandemic, our institution took a deep look at the degree awarding gap, which highlighted how, despite having the same entry qualifications, similar economic backgrounds and having been taught by the same teaching teams, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students graduate with lower awards than their white peers

(Panesar, 2017). Although our university has taken a strong lead on addressing the gap nationally, our own department's gap has remained larger in comparison.

Based upon these huge shifts in the social, cultural and political landscape of universities, the team decided to re-organise our delivery of academic support in a way that not only formalised our ways of working as distinctly 'third space' but also created a 'public service' for students and colleagues, as we increased the visibility of our professional activities.

Method

The current team of academic mentors, collectively, have wide experience in academic support across the three subject areas that make up the department – art, architecture and design – at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Rather than an 'instant' remedy or facilitating perfunctory performance, their ethos is one of sustainable support, which Pokorny and Warren (2021) characterise as a *deep* approach to the development of effective academic learning. Yet, historically, the delivery of academic support had been through subject areas where an academic mentor was assigned to either art, architecture or design courses. Traditionally, in our department, the team had therefore been largely hidden from view because students only found us through referrals made by academic or professional services. Similarly, colleagues across the university were challenged to locate the academic mentors as a coherent body of expertise in academic support within the creative arts due to their disparate locations within subject areas.

As a result, the team took the decision to approach academic support through levels of study, where there would be an emphasis on academic life skills and literacies as they develop throughout a degree programme. As Lea and Street (2006) suggest, students are both socialised and enculturated into the *academic* experience yet making meaning out of this is not always accessible nor supported. As a result, each level of study is now assigned an academic mentor from foundation to final year undergraduate students. In this way, every student in the department has a named academic mentor they can contact for a one-to-one meeting. The team works by assigning two mentors to each level so, for example, the same two academic mentors support levels 3 and 4, while the other two mentors support levels 5 and 6.

To implement this change, the team created a generic email address that allowed all students and colleagues to contact them, regardless of which level. That way, the team could then organise their responses according to level while ensuring that students did not carry the burden of having to work this out themselves when they wanted to speak to an academic mentor. We already had an online VLE dedicated to academic support that enabled us to work with many more students than before 2020. In addition, the team took every formal opportunity to define the services on offer, such as the range of workshops, specific learning resources, drop-in sessions, or their contribution to a range of activities from enrolment to graduation throughout the academic calendar. Although none of these services were new to the team, what was different was the emphasis on making them explicit contributions to a level of study.

Finally, we kept a note of students who had accessed academic support, whether through an individual meeting, email conversation or a workshop embedded within a taught module by recording their ID number, over the course of six months in the second half of one academic year. With the support of colleagues in our institution's Centre for Equity and Inclusion, we were able to analyse the engagement of 140 students with a focus on age, gender, race and disability.

Findings/Discussion

Based on the quantitative data, many team discussions and research on the concept of third-space working, we present our findings through the framework Whitchurch (2009) suggests defines blended professionals: relationships, knowledges and legitimacies.

Relationships

When conceptualising third-space working, a key dimension of professional practice is relationships (Whitchurch, 2009). In many ways, they underpin our ability to contribute positively to student success (Whitchurch, 2009; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). Yet, this emphasis on relationships is threefold because not only is it about developing partnerships with colleagues on the one hand or joining the dots of the university experience for students on the other, but it is also about the quality of these relational practices.

For example, for us to be credible third-space professionals, we often must work in a non-authoritative manner (Whitchurch, 2009) so as to best reflect our blended or integrative role. We find ourselves frequently negotiating our *quasi-academic* status (Whitchurch, 2008). To do this successfully, it is vital that we adopt an 'epistemology of compassion' (Vandeyar and Swart, 2016, p.141), engaging with students and colleagues in a supportive, non-judgmental manner. The aim here is to foster and cultivate hope, optimism, resilience and self-efficacy within the university through a compassionate approach to relationships, assuming that this is what sustains others in times of academic stress and success (Luthans et al, 2015; Lemon et al, 2023).

In practice, this has been easier to do within a context of level-specific support because the team represents the common ground that is associated with both the experience of learning as a first-year or third-year student and the experience of teaching as a foundation coordinator or dissertation module leader. However, we recognise that partnership working takes time because, for many colleagues, collaboration, for example, is not the dominant way of supporting student success.

Knowledges

By assigning the team to levels of study, along with a dedicated VLE, we have been able to highlight the significance of academic literacies associated with each level of study by drawing attention to specific study skills and academic cultures that all students will encounter equally, depending upon which year they are in within their degree (Lea and Street, 2006). We feel we have moved closer to creating what Whitchurch (2009, p.410) describes, conceptually, as an 'interactive knowledge environment' for our students where our presence is more explicit across the department.

In practice, we have focused on developing more opportunities across the department for students to name the obstacles they think would get in the way in their learning journey, allowing the space to name all the elements beyond their identity as students. During a presentation skills workshop that allowed students to explore the underlying causes of their anxiety and together come up with strategies to overcome such fears, one student said: 'I take away a lot. I still need to digest it, but I've learnt we are all stressed sometimes, and it can be worked on with knowledge and the right mindset'.

However, working with students like this has highlighted our own identities as third-space practitioners, where we are neither here nor there or similarly, where we feel that we are proficient in lots of academic skills but not necessarily experts in any (Whitchurch, 2008). We increasingly recognise how important it is to participate in knowledge networks associated with student success (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022).

Legitimacies

Delivering academic support through levels of study may be more effective when tackling barriers to student success. For example, local evidence has suggested that the awarding gap is impacted by assessment and feedback practices across levels, not just within certain subject areas. In other words, student success is impacted by the extent to which a student identifies with their own academic literacies but, perhaps more importantly, academic teachers judge students on their ability to *be academic*, not just their subject-specific knowledge. Prior to our change in delivery, the legitimacy of the team was always an issue for academic colleagues because the mentors did not entirely belong to the teaching teams. Yet, it is the team's position that being 'in-between' gives them access to activities and knowledge that would otherwise have been out of reach. Therefore, by organising delivery by levels and thus highlighting their 'in-between' status, it is possible that academic support is now perceived as a public service for both students and staff.
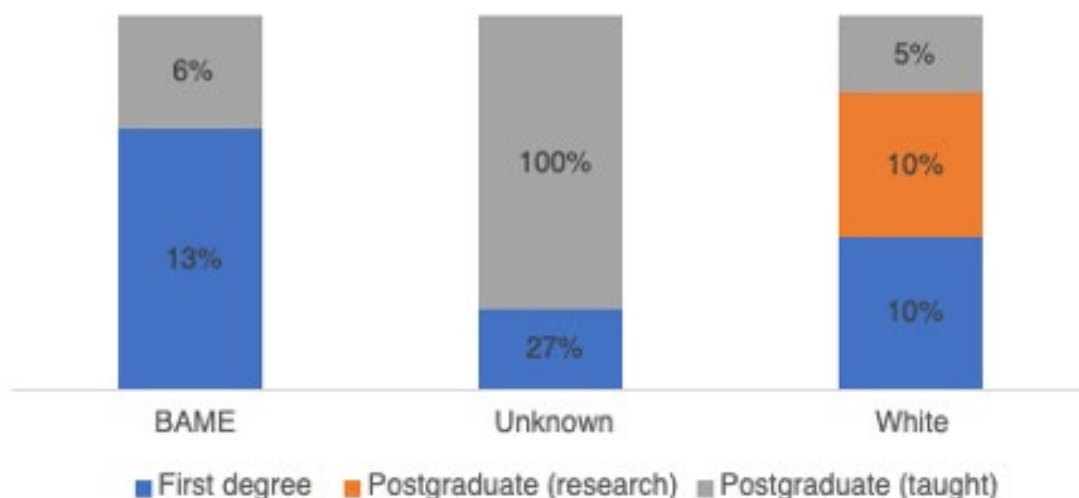
Figure 1. Student engagement as a proportion of enrolment by age.
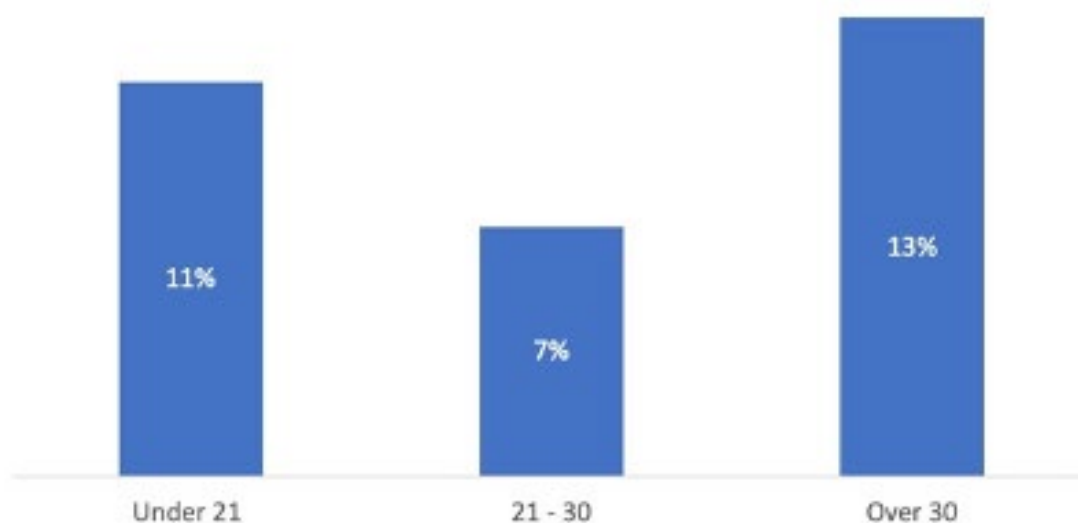
Figure 2. Student engagement as a proportion of enrolment by gender.
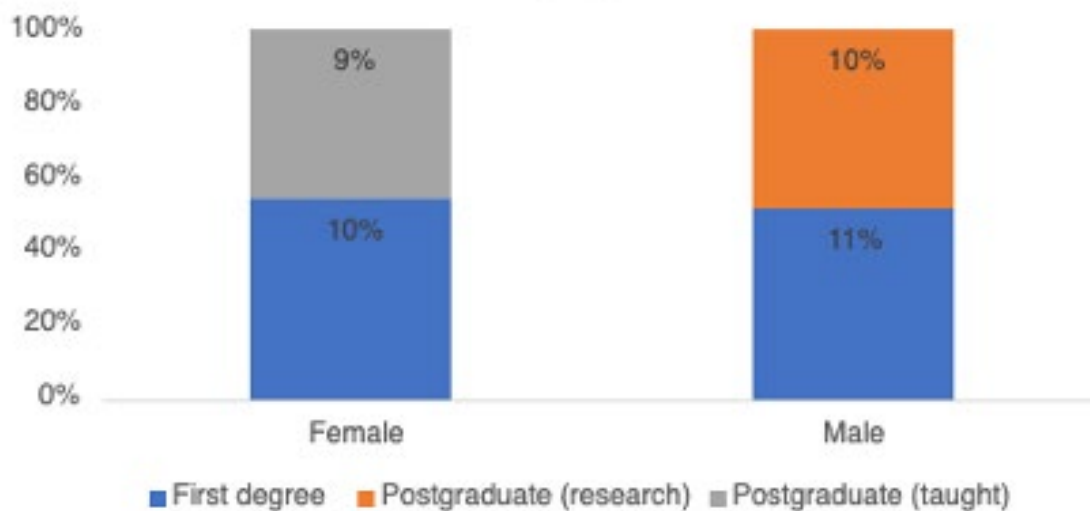
Figure 3. Student engagement as a proportion of enrolment by ethnicity.

The demographic data in Figures 1, 2 and 3 represents 140 students across the creative arts department who engaged with academic support over six months in 2022/23. Looking at this data, we suggest that all students, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or disability, experience concerns about their academic development. These characteristics did not vary greatly either separately or when looked at together. By making our third space working a visible service to anyone undertaking university study, the data suggests we challenged the assumption that academic support is remedial and/or defensive in both concept and practice (Hall, 2022). In other words, we show academic support to be a

credible practice within the university by highlighting the 'in-between' as a legitimate space, whether that be a temporary or sustained experience for our students and colleagues. In a way, a degree is a series of constant transitions that require scaffolding and moments for reflection. Academic support as a third space enables us to acknowledge inequalities and to accompany learners, as companions, through the third space, that is academia or higher education, with the recognition that time here is best spent as a journey rather than settling down.

Conclusion

The role of the academic mentor in a designated third space, as we have experienced it, is one where we seem to increasingly enrich, rather than address academic concerns raised by students. By formalising the third space as that of the degree structure, where a range of departments intersect on behalf of student success, it is possible for students to feel they belong to a range of learning communities, whether that is their course, their level or their university. This echoes Hooks' (1994) idea that liberation through education can be attained through a holistic approach to learning and teaching that considers the well-being and self-actualisation of both teachers and learners. In this sense, the third space allows for the process of making the unconscious explicit that Freire (1996) describes as *conscientisation*.

Recently, there has been some discussion regarding the term 'third space' and to what extent it helps those who work there to make sense of their identity (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022); this may depend on the lived experience of students and colleagues. While we understand that the term 'third space' may hinder its value within an institution, in our case, where we are a small team within a creative arts department that belongs to a post-92 institution, the term has helped us to identify our practice more clearly in relation to other forms of support and so having a boundary has been a positive outcome. Coming together to co-write this article is our first opportunity to demonstrate that to both us and others. This has certainly led to a collegial approach amongst our team, becoming more of a distinct community of practice, sharing ideas, a common purpose, common challenges, support and encouragement.

Acknowledgements

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