

What's in a name: The ambiguity and complexity of technology enhanced learning roles

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With the growing ubiquity of educational technology, there has been an increased need for specialised practitioners to advise on and support technology enhanced learning within Higher Education. Academic developers, instructional designers and educational technologists are all examples of these skilled individuals typically working in 'third space' that crosses complex boundaries - between the pedagogical and technological, and the academic and professional. However, role titles and descriptions of duties are often unclear at best, with a lack of consistent terminology used across institutions and in the literature. This can lead to confusion and tensions when working with multiple institutional stakeholders who are uncertain about the abilities and knowledge of people in these roles; potentially exacerbating 'the academic/professional divide' in Higher Education and weakening the collaborative relationship between TEL workers and academics.

This paper presents a synthesis of key literature related to contemporary TEL advisor and support roles in Higher Education alongside a preliminary analysis of 37 recent position descriptions of these roles. The application of social practice theory as our conceptual framework enables us to further explore the significance of practices in defining and differentiating these roles. This paper offers a step forward to the ways in which clarity and consistency of these roles might be sought. Future implications of this study are included for further consideration.

Introduction

The availability of technology has exponentially transformed the learning and teaching space in Higher Education (HE) over the last few decades (Roberts, 2005). HE institutions and staff are moving towards technology enhanced learning (TEL) practices often in an attempt to meet market competition and student needs (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Such change has necessitated an increase in support or advisory roles for technology enhanced learning and teaching initiatives. These roles include academic developers, instructional designers and educational technologists, among others (Rizhaupt and Kumar, 2015). These are sometimes described as 'hybrid' roles that do not "fit neatly into existing organizational structures" (Oliver, 2002, p.245) and their scope is often not clearly defined (Bird, 2004; Davidson, 2003). Whitchurch (2008) notably describes the professional staff and academics working in these roles as inhabiting a 'third space' – one overlapping traditional professional and academic domains within HE. In this paper we therefore refer to those who work in this complex and hybrid space with knowledge and experiences of TEL practices as 'third space TEL workers'.

Working within third space territories, the 'newness' and lack of clarity surrounding these roles and duties brings a number of challenges. People in these roles often feel marginalised and "defined by what they are not" (Gornall, 1999, p. 44). Fraser and Ling (2014) and Roberts (2005) highlight potential tensions in building relationships across institutional stakeholder groups due to this instability, which can impact the outcomes of learning and teaching initiatives. This instability and tension potentially disempowers third space TEL workers, particularly professional staff members (Oliver, 2002). There are key gaps in existing research that fail to clarify how third space TEL roles work in practice. Clearly defining third space TEL roles may allow for improvements to professional relationships and educational quality for third space TEL workers and institutions – or conversely, highlight additional challenges.

This paper aims to explore current definitions and practices of TEL roles in the third space, building on our existing understanding through literature review and preliminary analysis of position descriptions. The current paper therefore sets out to answer the below questions:



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- What are the skills, capabilities and expectations held of workers in third space TEL roles?
- What are the practices of third space TEL workers as described in the existing literature and recent job advertisements for these roles?
- How do these practices align with the position titles?

Literature review - roles and duties of third space TEL workers

The plethora of discourse around the complex nature of the third space in the past literature (Willcox, Sarma & Lippel, 2016), exposes a lack of clarity around the language used in explicating its workers. In broad terms however, the literature identified the following key third space TEL worker roles:

- Academic developer
- Designer: Learning/educational designer, and instructional designer
- Technologist: Learning/educational technologist

Due to the space and scope limitations for this paper, we have: (a) elicited common definitions of these roles, and (b) identified important absences of indicative practices in the role definitions.

Academic developer

Academic developers undertake a broad range of learning and teaching and curriculum improvement tasks including: improving and support of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment; research and evaluation of teaching and learning; and engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning (cf. Bath & Smith, 2004; Fraser & Ling, 2014). The literature emphasises that the academic developer role is one of curriculum development, training and staff capacity building, and yet there is little to no reference to their competent use of educational technology.

Designer

Designer roles have titles such as instructional designer and educational or learning designer but it is unclear if these terms are interchangeable or denote role nuances. In HE, designers often work with a subject matter expert, generally a teaching academic (Ritzhaupt and Kumar, 2015) to design pedagogical approaches and learning resources in TEL initiatives (Torrissi and Davis, 2000). They must possess "a solid foundation in instructional design and learning theory... soft skills and technical skills, and have a willingness to learn on the job..." and "...keep abreast of multiple emerging information and communication technologies" (Ritzhaupt and Kumar, 2015, p. 51). The key difference of the design role to the academic developer role is the inclusion of technology.

This therefore necessitates technological skills as well as an understanding of design, curriculum and pedagogy for online/blended learning – thereby encroaching on the skills sets and role of the academic developer.

Technologist

Technologist role titles include learning technologist, e-Learning technologist and educational technologist. Competing descriptions of the ET role have indicated it is primarily a strategic one responsible for technology provision (Shurville et al., 2009), but also noted overlap with other 'third space' TEL roles including designers (Ritzhaupt & Martin, 2014; Shurville et al., 2009) and academic developers due to an increasing focus toward pedagogy (Soyoz, 2010).

Oliver (2002) touches on the tensions around the status of learning technologists, finding that LTs felt they were perceived by some academic staff as 'only' having a "technical role" (p. 250), with their pedagogical knowledge not recognised. These technologists perceived this as a significant challenge that impacted their ability to effectively engage with academics.

The existing literature brings to the fore that even though efforts have been made to scrutinise and define the various roles and practices of third space TEL workers, there is still little consensus about what each role entails. This gap in the literature led us to carry out a preliminary analysis of advertised position descriptions and their stated practices. Our discussion stems from the stance that examining the primary practices associated with each role offers greater insight into the roles than their seemingly arbitrary position titles.

Theoretical framework – social practice theory

In order to better understand these roles and their practices in context, we draw on social practice theory as our theoretical framework. Social practice theory, as defined by Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012), examines the practices that people engage in; the competences, materials and meanings that they are comprised of; and the ways that practices emerge, evolve and spread. Practices persist even as practitioners come and go, so by mapping primary practices to specific role titles, we hope to highlight the principle purpose of the roles to encourage future clarification of unified terminologies.

Methodology

To better understand these roles, we gathered and analysed 37 job advertisements relating to the third space TEL roles in 13 Australian Universities. These job ads were published between 2012 and 2017 and were found through public web search by the authors. The

advertisements analysed were spread across academic and professional roles with a range of seniority levels – from Professional HEW 2 to 8 to Academic A to C, respectively (see Table 1 below). The roles are grouped by common titles.

Table 1: Roles analysed in the 37 job advertisements (Position Levels: HEW/Academic)

| | Professional position titles | Academic position titles |
|--------------------|--|---|
| Academic Developer | Senior Academic Developer x2 (8) | Academic Developer x2 (C,B) |
| Designer | Learning Designer x3 (6/7,7,7/8); Digital Education Designer x2 (7); Senior Educational Designer x2 (8); Educational Designer x4 (7,7,8,8); eLearning Designer (8) | Senior Lecturer (Course Enhancement)(C); Lecturer (Learning Futures)(B); Lecturer (Education Development)(B); |
| Technologist | Learning Technologist (5); Educational Technologist (6) | |
| Other: Coordinator | Coordinator Learning & Teaching Services (7); Senior Coordinator digital learning design (8); Online learning systems coordinator (7); | eLearning Coordinator (Technology) (B/C); Blended Learning Coordinator (B/C); eLearning Coordinator (B/C) Senior Academic Lead (C); |
| Other: Officer | Teaching support officer x2 (5,6); Online engagement officer (6), Digital learning projects officer (7), Blended learning officer (2); | eLearning Project Officer (B/C); |
| Other: Developer | Senior Educational Developer (8); | |
| Other: Advisor | eLearning Advisor (7) | eLearning Advisor (B/C); |

Our analysis focused on the descriptions of practices third space TEL workers are expected to perform – commonly referred to as the duties statement. Drawing from content and thematic analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013) we scrutinised the role title, academic/professional status, position description and duties statements. This resulted in identifying the seven key practices expected of the third space TEL workers: *train*, *research/evaluate*, *support/advise*, *design*, *develop*, *design/develop*, and *lead/manage*.

The number of times that a practice was connected to the position description was tallied to identify the primary practice/s of each position. Generic competencies such as communication and teamwork skills, though recognised as important to these roles (Ritzhaupt and Martin, 2014), are not included in our analysis as these practices do not offer distinctive attributes of the practices that specifically define third space TEL workers

Discussion – what is in a name?

The seven practices of the third space TEL workers

Across the 37 position descriptions that we examined, *train* was one of the most widely spread primary practices for third space TEL workers with 31/37 positions having training related duties. It was notably a primary practice across positions ranging from Academic Level C to Professional HEW2.

Support/advise equally appeared in 31/37 position duty statements and is clearly considered to be a vital component of third space TEL workers practice, across almost all positions. It connected third space TEL workers to a wide range of practices carried out by the people being supported/advised which ranged from pedagogically focused activities to more technological ones.

We considered the practice of *research/evaluate* to include not only the traditional association to academics of a scholarly approach to the creation of new knowledge, but also evaluation of technologies and teaching practices, linked more to professional staff. This was the second most common practice, appearing in the duty statements of 28/37 positions.

Design was represented as a stand-alone practice in 11/37 positions, as was *develop*. However, 14/37 positions treated design and develop in a single sentence as part of the integrated inseparable practice. For this reason, we added *design/develop* as a separate practice. Given that 18/37 of the third space TEL worker position titles included variations on ‘Designer’ or ‘Developer’, this may be considered to be an important, and yet, ill-defined practice, or conversely, as Bird (2004) found in a review of the literature, “...the titles instructional, educational, design and development are used synonymously” (p.124). We see *design* and *develop* as both relating to curriculum, course design and learning resources (including online course building), with *develop* generally having more of a practical and technology-oriented focus than the more theoretical/pedagogical *design*.

Lead/manage was represented as a practice in 8/37 positions. These tended to be more senior roles related to specific institutional TEL initiatives.

Academic Developer

The four Academic Developer positions all had *training* as a primary practice. Two of these positions were professional and two were academic. One academic and one professional position included *design* or *develop* practice related to curriculum or learning resources. Of all the positions, this was the most consistently defined and it aligns closely with the definitions found in the literature

– namely, one of curriculum development and building staff capacity around learning and teaching.

Designer

All 12 designer roles were professional positions. The role titles in our analysis included digital education designer, learning designer, educational designer (web developer) and eLearning designer, all specifying design in the title. Of the 12 positions however, only one actually had **design** as a primary practice. One other had **design/develop** as a primary practice. Five had **support/advise** as a primary practice. Two positions had the primary practice as **research**; two others as **develop**; and another as **train**.

Technologist

The two Technologist positions analysed were both professional positions at HEW6. Their primary practices were **support/advise** and **develop**. The advice and support practices were directly related to educational technology implementations. The titles for these roles were learning technologist and educational technologist, however there was no indication that they were substantively different.

Other role titles for third space roles (17) did not sit neatly within the above three role categories and lay across professional and academic positions. They included (but were not limited to) ‘developer’ roles outside of academic developer. In line with some of the perceptions identified in the literature, the academic positions had a more pedagogical focus while professional staff had a more technological focus.

Conclusion

Our thematic analysis of the selected 37 job advertisements within the third space confirmed what was indicated in the literature - significant overlap and/or disconnection between the current titles of third space TEL worker roles and their expected practices. The fact that 16/37 titles don't align with key role titles in literature suggests that these titles might not present great significance to HE institutions. The literature has identified challenges in providing meaning and value for these roles and gaining reputation with other stakeholders. Further research is therefore needed to further investigate: the nature of third space TEL worker practices - particularly the distinction between design and develop, the nuances across role definitions and the overlaps and distinctions between third space TEL roles compared to other academic and institutional stakeholder groups, and the tensions between institutional roles. Elements of Social Practice Theory may enable us to more accurately define third space TEL worker roles by aligning titles closely with their prevalent practices. Such future work is of high importance to ensure that increasingly in-demand, third space TEL workers are valued, supported

and empowered to make significant contributions to and advocate for technology enhanced learning, and to ensure effective relationships and collaboration between third space TEL workers and other key stakeholders in HE.

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Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.

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