

Optimising the Third Space in Higher Education: Case Studies of Intercultural and Cross-Boundary Collaboration

Natalia Veles, Routledge Research in Higher Education, Routledge, 2023.

Drawing on an empirical study of collaborations between professional services and academic staff in both Australia and Singapore, Veles (2023) brings together a collection of case studies which demonstrate and exemplify the potential of third space collaboration within higher education. The case studies are sandwiched between the first two and final three chapters. Chapters one and two explore the idea of third space concepts, theories, and the idea of boundary crossing. Chapters three to five summarise the case studies as exemplars of third space working and offer recommendations and a conceptual framework for future research which Veles (2023: viii) refers to as “collaborative capital optimisation”. This book builds on the previous work of Celia Whitchurch who has written prolifically on the third space in higher education (2006, 2009, 2012) and the more recent work of Bossu and Brown, (2018) and McIntosh and Nutt, (2022).

The introductory chapter discusses the historical concepts of the third space. Veles (2023) articulates its personal importance in her professional career and subsequently her research and interest in this field. While the author discusses the research already published around the third space, it is interesting to note that the Covid-19 pandemic created the opportunity for more cross-boundary working as institutional staff, in most areas, all came together to manage online pedagogy and assessment for students working in isolation.

The second chapter introduces the theoretical ideas of “self-determination” (SDT) theory and “boundary crossing learning mechanisms” (BCLM). SDT links to the ideas of self-motivation and well-being and links to BCLM by the learning third space professionals engage with when crossing the traditional boundaries of professional services and academic staff.

The case studies, based at both the Australian Tropical University and its satellite centre in Singapore follow. They range from creating a new model of training, technological and organisational change, and colleague collaboration. What Veles achieves through the structure of these chapters is a way for the reader to understand the challenges, the cross-boundary learning, values and needs of those participating in each case study and the rewards and learning each research participant has achieved. By creating this structure through diverse case studies situated in different countries, Veles enables understanding of each project and ties it back to the theory she discusses in chapter two.

Veles (2023) book concludes with her conceptualisation of *Basic Organisational Needs*. This theory argues that for institutions to develop collaborative capital, which the author describes as “a special form of social capital that represents the value and benefits of people’s collegial work and networks creation” (8), three conditions which frame *Basic Organisational Needs* should be implemented. These relate to the actor’s needs, the optimisation of boundary crossing and the positionality of third space environments, thereby optimising the collaborative capital of the third space professional. While Veles (2023) presents these case studies as positive progression and development for third space professionals, there is an assumption that all third space professionals have these opportunities. It would be have been useful to hear more experiences from higher education professionals who have limited scope for cross-boundary working and the challenges they face in being recognised as working in the third space.

This book is an important addition to the current research into third space working (Stoltenkamp et al., 2017; Bossu and Brown, 2018; Smith et al., 2021; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022) and offers examples of how this can be achieved in different areas and cultures within higher education. It also illustrates

that higher education has the capacity for change and inclusive forms of working with demonstrable examples of cross boundary collaborations and the benefits and challenges that come with working as a third space professional.

References

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