

SPECIAL SECTION EDITORIAL

Students as Partners in Third Spaces

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In this special section, IJSaP's established lines of enquiry into partnership and co-creation converge with the concept of the "Third Space" (Bhabha, 1994; Gutiérrez, 2008). The editors and contributors are operationalizing the Third Space as a physical, metaphorical, or digital/virtual space, or a combination of all of these. Such a space can exist in an extra-curricular setting, a virtual learning environment, the community, a social media platform, or through a different way of working together in the classroom. The locations can therefore be understood as both material and virtual. What matters is that Third Spaces require a negotiation and flattening of hierarchies and the validation and acknowledgment of different forms of knowledge. (Potter & McDougall, 2017).

Students' and teachers' ways of being in Third Spaces, as well as the pedagogies required by them, are qualitatively different to orthodox teaching spaces because they demand that the values and cultural capital of participants be featured. In significant ways, Third Spaces are therefore contested, negotiated, and political spaces in which students are positioned in a kind of partnership with educators. The co-production and exchange of what Potter and McDougall (2017: 83) describe as a more "porous" idea of expertise is an essential characteristic of these spaces.

The Third Space has its origins in the work of Bhabha (1994) and has been of interest for designing pedagogy in pursuit of equity and social justice. Gutiérrez (2008) offered the Third Space as a way to think about the social actors in a given setting, their autobiographical and temporal specificities, and how these could be accounted for in the design of an emancipatory form of educational experience. If Third Spaces in higher education have the potential to foster co-creation through "porosity", because they feature the values and cultural capital of participants or because they demand that the values and cultural capital of participants be featured, this suggests that ways must be found to account for whose knowledge counts and how boundaries of expertise can be negotiated formally and informally across and between various knowledge domains. This is achieved through more curational, negotiated, reflexive, and inter-disciplinary forms of pedagogy in a fruitful relationship between Third Space and socio-cultural and liminal partnership contexts (see Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013; Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011; Jensen & Bennett, 2015; and Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017).

Seeing student partnership in higher education as a Third Space clearly resonates with IJSaP's core lines of enquiry and its publication of recent research on how students and academics have worked as partners to generate knowledge together outside of conventional hierarchies (see Marquis et al., 2018; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016). However, as the establishment of this journal demonstrates, these partnership initiatives are progressing to maturation in higher education (see Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), and it is important to reflect on their transformative and redistributive impacts. We think that the concept of the Third Space enables this and offers a framing for existing, progressively disruptive work of this kind. For example, see Werder et al.'s (2010) work on dialogic "parlor talk," a space of structured informality where co-enquiry not only happens in conversation, as a way of being in learning, rather than simply in a physical space. Werder et al conceive of this kind of interaction as a literal and metaphorical privileging of dialogue between equals. In this way, the threshold concept of student partnership (see Cook-Sather, 2014) can be developed to include the idea of the Third Space in order to investigate (a) the meaning, nature, and possibilities of facilitating partnership in Third Spaces; (b) educational strategies for working collaboratively in such spaces; (c) suitable methodologies for investigating Third Space partnerships; and (d) the associated ethical and representational issues arising from the "writing up" of Third Space partnerships.

These lines of enquiry converge to address the ways in which the notion of the Third Space might enrich, expand, or complicate thinking about Students as Partners. Working in the Third Space involves traversals across the threshold of the established order, challenging and subverting existing practices and hierarchies. To this extent, it is hard either to find or devise rubrics which detail strategies for those interested in giving it a go. In practice, as several of the articles in this volume attest to, it is often easier to experiment and work outside the box when both staff and students are trying something new. Transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary work or even work across universities seem like good places to start.

Activities such as co-creating curricula, conducting joint research, or developing reflexive modules about learning and teaching have the potential to allow students to exert agency and have their voices genuinely heard.

Third Spaces offer huge potential for social justice. However, working in the Third Space involves taking risks and valuing process over outcomes. Staff need to be comfortable with flux and fluidity and accept that they are in new territory and that their roles are reconfigured to encompass their own learning in the situation. While this may be liberating, it exposes all participants to greater ambiguity and a diminished sense of security. Staff need to be aware that an invisible pedagogy (Bernstein, 1975), or one in which students have more control, may be more accessible for some students than others. It may feel risky for any student to step out of their comfort zone and assert themselves when not knowing exactly what is expected of them. Such heightened ambiguity (and often increased workload) may have the exact opposite effect of what is intended, putting additional pressures on those whom the space is meant to empower—those from non-traditional backgrounds and under-represented constituencies.

To counter this, teachers and academics must go beyond a surface awareness of the importance of inclusion and diversity. They must be sure to seek out and value what students bring to the space from the wider community. They must also recognize the importance and encourage the development of peer networks, which can function as new tethers once the traditional student-teacher nexus has been broken. Most importantly, working in the Third Space involves issues of subjectivity, positionality, and shifting

identities. As traditional binaries, dualisms, and dichotomies are broken down between student and teacher, it is possible for all parties to be involved in something transformative.

However, a rebalancing of the power dynamic between staff and learners is no easy task. It is only really possible where a culture of reflexivity is developed, that is, where students and staff are forced to reflect on their own position in relation to dominant norms. At its most successful, Gutiérrez (2008) empowered her students in the Third Space by getting them to write a “syncretic testimonio” in which they at once reflected on and celebrated their heritages and produced a text “situated in the subjective particularity and global and historical reality in which people co-construct their understanding of the social world and of themselves” (p. 149). This may be a vital starting point when trying to refashion the classroom into “a site where no cultural discourses are secondary” (Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995, p. 447).

Methodologies which allow for an unpacking of affect and intention may be crucial for truly understanding what goes on in Third Space partnerships. The articles in this special section all respond to these challenges in different ways and to different ends, but the commonalities which they exhibit coalesce around how the notion of Third Space adds our understanding of students as partners by addressing the pedagogic and interactive conditions and arrangements, whether physically or metaphorically *spatial* – ways of being in partnership - that need to be in place to go beyond superficial experiments in co-creation to address issues of social justice, participatory pedagogy, and the valuing of the social and cultural capital of all learners in educational settings.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

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