



Navigating the third space: the online community mentoring program

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Professional and academic staff with a focus on learning and technology are both increasingly present in Australasian universities and seen as vitally important in the delivery of high-quality learning experiences. These professional staff often have titles such as learning designers, technology integrators, educational designers and similar. Yet their precise position and role within higher education, and indeed, the requisite skills and knowledge required to successfully perform these roles often remains vague, especially for academic staff with whom they work. These roles became even more important during the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022).

These staff often work in what is described as the “third space” (Whitchurch, 2008), a hybridized zone that requires an understanding of different types of learning programs, and ways in which these can be delivered most effectively in a virtual environment (Zellweger, Moser & Bachmann, 2010). In this way, they are boundary crossers (Watermeyer, Crick & Knight, 2021) between the academic and professional spaces, required to work within both, but belonging to neither. This can often contribute to feelings of professional isolation amongst these staff, as well as a lack of clarity about career progression.

Mentoring is recognised as an avenue for welcoming new members of the profession. It combines more experienced members with less experienced members and takes the form of regular meetings to discuss challenges and opportunities (Bean & Hyers, 2014; Donnelly & Mcsweeney, 2010). The online variant is hardly new, although it has grown significantly during the pandemic (Joseph, Lahiri-Roy & Bunn, 2022). It offers advantages in terms of reach and scalability to participants, although there are potential weaknesses, too. Traditionally, mentoring is an activity that takes place between one mentor and one protégé. However, group mentoring is on the increase.

This presentation reports on how a group approach taken in a community mentoring program (CMP) comprised of five staff from different universities (three mentors and two mentees) provided an avenue for third space staff to share their experiences with each other in order to begin formulating a collective professional identity. Group mentoring allowed a greater diversity of experiences and ideas, which in turn contributed to a greater feeling of ‘being in it together’. The CMP became a space for the exploration and discussion of different roles within higher education, as well as the sharing of common experiences, successes and frustrations. Our reflections may inspire you to create a similar opportunity within your own institutions, or through the ASCILITE Mentoring Program.

Keywords: Community mentoring, third space, professional academic, online

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