How do we define the third space?

As universities expand and ‘traditional’ academic career opportunities contract, third space academics – who serve not only scholarship but institutional priorities – are emergent. According to McFarlane (2011), third space academics are neither exclusively teaching-focused nor research-orientated, yet they participate in intellectual communities and bring an academic skill base to bear on the provision of university services.

The role of the third space academic usually defines where this space might be situated in an organisation and informs its relationship with partner units and faculty services. Further to this, the remit and function of the third space role greatly influences its effectiveness and reach.
The Curriculum Design Lab at the University of Melbourne is indicative of this space. It was established by the Faculty of Arts in July 2016 and operates at the intersection of a variety of the Faculty’s Arts T&L services while also diversifying its capacity with collaborations across a range of university partner services.

(CLICK) In the 12 months to August we have worked on 59 undergraduate subjects, with 39 academics across 20 areas of study in the Arts. Some of these curriculum projects have had a quick turnaround involving approaches to active learning initiatives or assessment tweaks while others have involved wholesale curriculum changes that have required considerable edits to the Course Handbook and therefore are on the slow road to reinvention.
The CD Lab however is responsible for more than just curriculum design, currently we are engaged with:

(CLICK) professional development for early career academics
(CLICK) developing active learning strategies
(CLICK) implementing technology initiatives
(CLICK) building knowledge networks
(CLICK) developing and building capacity in staff
(CLICK) testing and evaluating initiatives
(CLICK) socialising innovation and best practice
So, where is this third space?

(CLICK) The Curriculum Design Lab sits inside the Arts Faculty’s Teaching & Learning ecosystem. (CLICK) It is also part of a broader support network that includes other faculties and research centres, such as the The Williams Centre for Advancing Learning in the Faculty of Business and Economics, the central Learning Environments team and the Centre for the Study of Higher Education.
So, where is this third space?

Essentially, in an organisational context the third space is an in-between space. (CLICK) In an operational context, it is a fluid space that moves between an organisation’s various service capacities and teaching and learning programs. Through consultation and dialogue the third space can bring people together and build capacity in existing programs and produce a more unified service for academics.

Yet reform in the classroom and in the curriculum requires new work flows and the introduction of new paradigms. In order to be effective reformists a third space academic must leverage existing capacity in the teaching and learning portfolio by designing complimentary interfaces between services in order to facilitate a more integrated approach.
Why is the curriculum design lab different?

One of our guiding principles, is that any change proposal – whether it be a curriculum refresh, a professional development program or a teaching strategy - must be founded on well-researched scholarly principles and/or pedagogy.

This is informed by our collective discipline expertise which means our curriculum design project work is a collaborative and shared exercise. We believe this could prove to be foundational in building more interdisciplinary opportunities across the BA program.

This diversity of expertise is complimented by a blend of academic scholarship and project management expertise. (CLICK) So on the one hand we have an academic profile that consists of:

- individual research profile
- Individual discipline expertise
- deep teaching experience
Alongside this – or intertwined with it, perhaps - is a management profile that benefits from a:

- cross-disciplinary approach
- extensive course management expertise
- and a pedagogical approach that is built upon connected learning principles
How do we define the third space?

(CLICK) As I have already alluded to, the third space is an **in-between space**

What makes the third space so dextrous is its systems integration. In many ways we act as a bridge between the professional and administrative functions of the university and the scholarly research expectations of academics and the curriculum:

- Third space academics are therefore neither strictly teaching-focused nor exclusively research-orientated nor are they restricted to the institution’s administrative arm.
- Essentially, they participate in intellectual communities and bring an academic skill base to bear on the provision of university services

(CLICK) The third space is a **knowledge network**

Importantly, this is a space of dialogue and knowledge exchange:

- Third space academics facilitate conversations and encourage dialogue between
• Third space academics have career trajectories that are collaborative, interdisciplinary and therefore not easily defined.

(CLICK) The third space reflects societal change

• Third space academic needs to be cognisant of broader societal concerns – and what we might consider as liberal arts concerns around public service – such as equality, social justice, Indigenous perspectives, democratic values and personal well-being.
• Again, this is another variant of the in-between space, but instead we are fostering connections between the curriculum, the classroom and the publics and the manner in which these connections are articulated within a diverse discipline portfolio.

(CLICK) The third space is also a data space

Work within the HASS disciplines must be ready to embrace data and the systems that make the analysis of data a technique of both research and of pedagogy. As Julia Flanders from Northeastern University argues, to leverage the potential of well modelled data we need to embrace well designed “smart tools”. Smart tools Flanders warns, does not negate the need for smart data, instead our ability as researchers to recognise the substance and details of quality data modelling will make for a richer humanities research experience and in the context of the third space, more interesting humanities pedagogy.

(Flanders, J. 2016 The Shape of Data, http://sites.middlebury.edu/dla/2016/04/11/the-shape-of-data/)
Why the third space?

(CLICK) Change takes time.

The unique structure of the Curriculum Design Lab means that the grunt work of researching curricula and designing learning strategies can be conducted on behalf of the subject coordinator or program leader. Depending on the design proposal, academics can be referred on to partner units such as a technology specialist, a collections manager or an Arts librarian to develop bespoke scholarly and technology initiatives on their behalf. This model is designed to build capacity in the teaching portfolio and minimise the burden such initiatives traditionally have on time poor academics.

(CLICK) A 2016 workload survey, conducted in the UK by the University and College Union, presents a set of figures that demonstrate these time pressures:

(CLICK) UK academics work on average 13.4 hours – almost two days – more than the normal 37.5 hour working week
One in six academics aged 25 or under work 100 or more hours per week (when converting a part-time contract to its full-time equivalent).

83% say the pace of university work has increased significantly since as late as 2013.

We probably don’t need to see these figures, we most likely feel them in our bones. What this demonstrates of course is how hard negotiating change can – and will be – if the collaborative model of academic support is not fully understood or communicated.
Institutions large and small handle change differently. Smaller institutions might be more flexible but they also might be more vulnerable if change is not handled correctly. In a faculty as large and multi-disciplinary as the Faculty of Arts with a portfolio of Schools with such a rich and diverse history – or one might say, complicated and fiercely independent mindset - instigating any reform from the outside demands an awareness of the many unique cultural considerations.

This does not negate the obvious organisational challenges that are indicative of any collaboration:

(CLICK)

- change needs a plan
- change requires leadership
- partnerships require trust
- identifying best practice is not always easy
- negotiating individual and organisational sensitivities can be a minefield
- institutional capabilities can be uneven
Of course, the rationale and motivation for change must be clearly articulated.

(CLICK) There are a number of perceptual reasons that change can be viewed in a negative or obstructionist light.

(CLICK) As with any change there has to be evidence that the change is necessary, that a particular approach is the right approach and that such things can be budgeted for. It is also a process that may take several iterations to get right, therefore the benefits are not immediately obvious. Sometimes change is needed to build a body of evidence that more change is in fact required.

Again, this all takes time.
While we don’t have the room to fully explore the intersection of curriculum design and technology in this presentation, it is important to note that although technology informs much of what we do as academics and facilitates much of what students do in pursuit of their education, real systemic change has not occurred as it has in another sectors.

It is clear that higher education is the next site of widespread technological disruption, (although many would argue this was set on train some time ago). We can see – or at least imagine - this occurring on multiple fronts, but whether we are willing to invest in a calm and methodical navigation of this transition remains to be seen. We have all witnessed how universities have been burnt by jumping on the technology bandwagon too soon. We have all toiled away with services that lumber along at a glacial pace because of bad technology investments that cannot be upgraded or replaced at a reasonable face-saving cost.

There have been many bespoke, timely and well-targeted precedents to the contrary – mobile projects, blended courses, curatorial apps, subscription services, micro course credits, industry partnerships, and so on. These have produced outstanding technological tools and resources that the education sector has either partnered on
or had a hand in developing. This must continue and, from an Arts perspective, it must be wedded to a re-appraisal of the BA curriculum and the form and function of its delivery. We have to ask ourselves:

To avoid the consequences of disruption, the BA must acknowledge the emergent technology practices that would now seem inevitable:
A move away from restrictive, clunky and unintuitive LMS systems
A questioning of the efficacy and value of learning analytics (and the lack of reciprocation)
A new wave of digitisation (3D object scanning, site acquisition, VR simulation and AR enhanced environments)
Alternative assessment models that integrate digital media production and publishing
Genuine partnerships with technology companies and content creators to build fit for purpose learning tools
Curatorship of digital content and traditional resources into meta-data driven semantic databases
The production – and licencing - of high-end media content

As someone who comes from a media production background, but having trained as creative artist, I am astounded that BA programs are not at the forefront of not only digital pedagogy but content creation and curation. It would seem self evident that institutions – especially the sandstones - that advertise the best teachers, the best research and the best facilities should also have the best network infrastructure and
the most sort after media assets. Surely we can recognise that the layering of digital platforms and network systems – or stacks as Benjamin Bratton has observed – and the comingling of digital media content is only reinforcing the perception of education as commodity and student as consumer. Besides the obvious neo-liberal agenda at work here, we should be cognisant of what this means in terms of competing for screen real estate - not only with other education providers - but with other forms of media content.

(CLICK) And finally, flexible and interchangeable subject offerings across institutions via micro accreditation and open data sharing between institutions

This might seem like a radical idea, but centralised open data and shared meta-data pillars could provide students with a detailed appraisal of the specific elements of discipline offerings between institutions and the ability to self-direct their education at a macro level. Why shouldn’t a student have all the learning outcomes, course materials, teaching expertise, technology support and relevant scaffolding principles cross-matched between all higher education service providers within a particular discipline, profession or industry pathway? Surely there is a place for a more open source approach to course design and a detailed student accreditation system at the back-end.
A city like Melbourne, with a geographic concentration of reputable universities with a mix of technical capacity and discipline expertise, could offer an inter-campus inter-institutional degree model.

(CLICK) Why should it not be feasible to do a couple of communication theory subjects at the University of Melbourne and then scoot down the road for some studio time at RMIT and then pop out to Monash or Swinburne to run some data visualisations before heading over to Deakin to package it up for broadcast or publication? All the while clocking up micro-credits that build to a degree that is designed by the student and driven by a concentrated mix of skills and expertise with an eye on industry and/or further study. Surely elements of this could also be hosted in cultural institutions and in local government.

This does not negate the need for a degree, obviously a version of this is already taking place online through OUA, but this does change what we imagine a degree can be. Students need skills, knowledge and the industry smarts to think critically about a world that is changing rapidly beyond the walls of the academy. They need to be able to respond in real time. So how do we package that so it is fit for sophisticated consumption and how accessible and transparent are the components in that
package?

(CLICK) “Degree prestige” however, is an issue. We can probably never resolve this in broad terms, as degrees from certain institutions are certainly a currency in the job market and an aspiration for families and boasting rights among their tribes. This however, ignores the minutia of what a contemporary university degree might consist of.

We can certainly re-align what prestige means. A blended cross-institutional model built on open data and defined by micro-credits would draw attention to student-selected skill-sets and staff driven knowledge expertise. This could help employers better target graduates and for graduates to better articulate the design of their chosen academic pathway. I would imagine the problem of “degree prestige” will also fade as the model takes hold and what becomes prestigious is the knowledge itself and who is facilitating it rather than the badge that validates it. Here we are drilling down into the expertise of individuals, the design of the curriculum and the leveraging of the institutional resources that support them. This is not then about the image of prestige but what constitutes, builds and sustains distinguished outcomes.
Currently, many gaps exist not only in technical skills but also digital literacy when we talk about technological capacity.

(CLICK) The gap is often wide, not only between staff and student but also between curriculum and industry expectations. The fix is often just a fiddle around the edges of delivery – a Padlet wall here a video over there a poll everywhere. Underwood and Farrington-Flint (2015) refer to the metaphor of ‘classroom orchestration’ when discussing the “alignment of the design of technology learning experiences with pedagogic practice.”

This is a critical point - to implement technology successfully it must be an authoritative act. In much the same way as academics are viewed as arbiters of authoritative knowledge (Lea, 2009) - with the provision of curated media content, internet resources and reference material - so to must the implementation of technology carry a similar sense of trust, competence and value.

Furthermore, we must view digital media literacy as a shared experience between learner and educator – it must be a deliberate collaborative act. This needs to be written into the manifesto of any BA program and inform its graduate attributes.
Therefore, sitting alongside traditional attributes we might consider engagement with technology to be an innate element and that graduate expectations and responsibilities around citizenry give a practical technological context to the profile of the 21st Century Arts graduate.
This should recognise graduates who are cognisant of and an active participant in: (CLICK)

- digital citizenship
- online identity management
- the protection and promotion of personal privacy
- evaluating, verifying and maintaining the integrity of information
- contributing to the cultural life of one’s community (online and off)

These are all dependent on engagement with not only what we understand to be digital literacy at an institutional level but digital literacy at an industrial and cultural level. This requires an ability to communicate effectively – and critically – across complex digital media channels through the act of making. We have an opportunity here to look at digital media as high-order organisational complexity.

This of course must be engaged with at the discipline level, and in many ways this may recast what BA disciplines can achieve in terms of their visibility and profile. We might also ask how we might socialise these attributes to the community and to industry.
To do this, we need to understand what we are talking about when we talk about media in a digital literacy context. Digital media should be seen as an opportunity to push towards this next layer of complexity within the digital literacy toolkit. Media can be an interface for collaboration and communication. Media can be a tool of construction and authorship. Media can be something that can be curated, manipulated and shared. Media can be a channel, an archive or a platform. What brings these slippery definitions together is the notion of media as production – the creation of media using image, sound, text and design elements to critically engage with, comment upon and interrogate knowledge.

Lowgren and Reimer call this “collaborative media” suggesting that we are not just authoring texts – in a traditional media studies context – but designing new “infrastructures”. (Lowgren & Reimer, 2013) In terms of a transitioning future work force for Arts graduates this is a critical distinction as new appointments not only call for critical thinking but also creative thinking and the ability to design new systems and new paradigms using a mix of old and new media.
This could be a transitional model for not only curriculum design but for cultural change. If, as third space academics, we can keep research as a key foundation of the curriculum refresh project then we may in turn influence the broader possibilities of what digital scholarship can be. After all, for such a project to succeed we must enamour academic faculty with the possibilities.

This however, will not be easy.

(CLICK) It takes courage to see beyond the interface - to see the code. We need to interpret venues of consumption, sites of data storage and networks of exchange as resources for constructing new forms of scholarly texts and new means to disseminate research.
We must also recognise that for our students media production operates in a sphere that they are intimately familiar with. It is a space in which they feel they can express themselves and construct dialogue and make meaning. (CLICK)

Working with sophisticated arrangements of image, text and graphics is not easy to do well but it can be an empowering act. For it is directly associated with the types of digital media systems students encounter every day. It is even the medium we as educators are increasingly choosing as the format to package their education and broadcast it back to them.

We can for instance look to the construction of social media campaigns – complex convergences of media production - as symbolic microcosms of collaboration and critical thinking. The complex cycle of conception, production, publication and engagement has wide utility across a multitude of work places befitting an Arts graduate. This is not only about analysis and interpretation, this is about critical engagement, design thinking and creative development for a future work environment that is inherently interdisciplinary. This is about producing - making. In broader terms, this is about harvesting a new set of core digital skills for the
classroom and the work environment. Skills that can embolden graduates to become informed and participatory digital citizens.
Of course, this presents a number of assumptions about young people and technology. One might ask, why do we need to teach digital media literacy to digital natives – don’t they already have all of this stuff on board? To curate a Tumblr archive or shoot a panoramic photo is a sophisticated technological act but it doesn’t constitute a proficiency in media production. (CLICK) According to the recent Foundation for Young Australians *New Work Order* report (FYA, 2016) a quarter of young people in fact demonstrate a low proficiency in digital literacy. The report also highlights the fact that the demand for enterprise skills – creativity, critical thinking and digital literacy – are all on the rise.
We also assume that the competent use of one form of technology therefore means a person has mastery over technology in all its forms. Furthermore, young people have conflicting feelings with regards to technology it can be at once personal and indispensable and in the same moment viewed with suspicion and anxiety. The Adobe Education report, *Gen Z in the Classroom*, while mirroring some of the FYA findings indicates that there is a “nervousness” around technology’s role in the future workplace and concern that technology might in fact inhibit their ability to “think outside the box”.
It is also inadequate to presume that emerging teaching staff have the skills and experience to deploy new technologies with the appropriate levels of ease and authority. So, in terms of this new digital literacy – the new digital normal - we have to look at both student and staff competencies within BA programs.

"Anyone who follows me on Twitter knows what I did last summer."
This will require a new provision of technology support that goes well-beyond traditional academic scholarly services.

(CLICK) It is time that we accept the use of office products, cloud computing, learning management systems and mobile computing as the base-line literacy for the provision of education. Scott Rodgers, from Birkbeck in London, has noted this constitutes what we could consider the basic operational model for digital humanities research and teaching pedagogy. Rodgers cites Katherine Hayles who posits this as the prefiguring of our ‘embodied virtuality’ in which the act of being digital in an academic context “is inherently about transformations to the cognitive and embodied environments of academic life at the level of the habitual or every day.” (Rodgers, 2017)

(CLICK) It follows then that the New Media Consortium’s 2016 Horizon report points to “Creative Literacy” as the next evolutionary step of a contemporary digital literacy framework for students, staff and the networks that support them.

This view is supported by the recently released Digital Literacy Framework produced by the University of Melbourne’s Digital Scholarship division that frames a research matrix with a number of capabilities including the ability to “create information” using a range of conventions and technologies and to “build networks to collaborate and connect”.
This model is informed by the Seven Elements of Digital Literacy guide produced in 2014 by JISC in the UK which also cites information literacy as another key element of this mix.

By placing media production skills into the digital literacy framework empowers students with a range of tools to accomplish the types of interdisciplinary project tasks that are increasingly becoming an industry expectation across diverse industry sectors such as marketing, health, government and education. In this context we need to consider students not as consumers of content but as producers of content.

As educators we have to better understand how we can play a shared role in the development of our students and how practical and progressive we can make the BA curriculum - and especially discipline assessment design - and the learning outcomes they are designed to meet.

So, what are the challenges facing the third space?

(Click) Industrial
As we have looked at in some detail, the relatively new nature of the third space academic means that there is often a sense of precarity around employment. This adds to a sense of impermanence about not only the role but the agenda it would seek to support and can engender suspicion among academic faculty with regards to the commitment of the institution. This also encourages condensed timelines to design, deliver and measure meaningful reforms. Further to this there is the broader sense that the provision of higher education is fragmenting in terms of academic delivery, student engagement and curriculum structures. So building a coherent narrative that can endure through such choppy waters.

(Click) Functional
There also functional challenges that need to be overcome, which are certainly not unique to Melbourne. When we hear the word innovation in the education space it is very rarely truly innovative. The reasons for this are many – funding, vision, courage, platform fatigue to name a few – but most commonly and most recognisably it is the embedded limitations of the systems that lie at the heart of all tertiary education
institutions that are designed to be restrictive (- I’m not sure why, perhaps it is the fear they might be broken or misunderstood). These include:

- Cumbersome, counter-intuitive technologies (such as Learning Management Systems) that are also difficult to work with and aesthetically unappealing.
- Limitations around the provision and sharing of institutional data both within Schools and faculties but also across institutions.
- And of course, the inflexible nature of administrative pipelines such as timely updating of subject details and assessment requirements.

(CLICK) **Organisational**

The ambition of the Faculty of Arts is clearly demonstrated by their investment in the third space but it is not immune to the very real budgetary and organisational concerns that – once started - the reform process exposes. While we feel well-served by the faculty it is evident that there are difficulties when designing and negotiating a cultural shift within a complex institutional structure. Therefore there are some obvious organisational challenges:

- adequate support and training for staff
- preserving the research focus and the efficacy of the reform process
- the wide – sometimes overlapping - brief of the third space role means that there can be confusion about the role making certain pragmatic functions more difficult than they should be

Ultimately, a generosity of spirit is required to establish reliable lines of communication or to integrate complimentary procedures with other units and departments within large lumbering institutions like universities.

(CLICK) **Irrational**

Meanwhile, education has become a business – not a great business, but a business all the same. The economic imperatives that govern tertiary institutions appear in unexpected places and in surprising conversations. For instance, when one tries to establish an open content-sharing philosophy on the intranet and university website one is confronted with nervous media and communication staffers who see education as another form of content acquisition and therefore something that should cloistered away behind a firewall.

In terms of our own personal dealings with various administrative pipelines there is a need for self preservation and professional dignity. The third space academic needs to maintain a critical distance when working with institutional systems that favour market ambition over the provision of education. When one works across so many jurisdictions, this is perhaps the greatest challenge of all.
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