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Honors as a Third Space Occupation

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Abstract: This essay argues that in order for honors to occupy and transform the academy it must begin by transforming itself. Drawing on Homi Bhabha’s notion of “third space,” the author argues that the traditional epistemic paradigms in higher education are inadequate for conceptualizing the praxis-driven work required in honors. Honors should be understood as a form of transdisciplinarity, with the aim of producing what is defined as Mode 2 knowledge. Only from within this non-binary professional framework is honors capable of disrupting, reimagining, and transforming the university.

Keywords: third space theory; transdisciplinarity; Mode 2 knowledge; positivism; Colorado College (CO)

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In the lead essay in this forum, Christopher Keller explores the many valences of honors as an occupation. The major through line of his article considers the nature, limits, and potential consequences of understanding honors as a kind of liquid territory that crosses boundaries “to occupy the social, cultural, political, and economic conversations that shape lives and transform communities.”

Keller’s essay primarily considers honors as a territory whereas I will consider it as a form of practice. I consider these meanings inextricably linked in the sense that the professional practice of honors is framed by and, in some sense, reflects and reifies the epistemic paradigms, value systems, and professional categorizations of the larger organizational territory in which it is situated, which is the academy as traditionally conceived. I suggest that honors hopes to transform the territory of the academy—to occupy it in the agential sense suggested by Stoller (2017)—it must begin by transforming

itself. As Audre Lorde more succinctly puts it, the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 2003).

HONORS AND THE THIRD SPACE

In his article, Keller explores the role of scholarship in advancing and sustaining occupational change. He asks us to consider not only the balance between the depth and breadth of our scholarly engagements but also the potential limits of honors scholarship. At the center of this exploration is an assumption about the nature of expertise in honors that merits further attention.

Expertise can be defined as specialist craft or knowledge that is cultivated by an individual. Although expert status is often assumed to be conferred by demonstrating expertise, the status of an expert is directly dependent on the social, political, and epistemic contexts in which expertise is situated (Grundmann, 2017). One becomes an expert not by demonstrating expertise but by demonstrating a legitimated form of expertise in a particular sociopolitical context. In almost all colleges and universities in the U.S., this context is shaped by the legacy of Positivism, which views expertise as the production of theoretically or mathematically rigorous knowledge vetted through disciplinary peer review processes (Schön, 1983, 1995; Frodeman, 2014; Stoller, 2020). Expert status is, then, conferred only through the mechanism of tenure, which supposedly guarantees that the individual has demonstrated the right form of expertise as determined by previously legitimated experts.

This epistemic imaginary provides the basis for the binary framing of labor in the academy, which is split between the so-called “academic” and “non-academic” domains (Fulton, 2003; Deem et al., 2007; Kogan and Teichler, 2007; Whitchurch, 2010). The former is devoted to the production and dissemination of “legitimate” (i.e., disciplinary) knowledge and is, therefore, the only domain in which one can gain expert status. On the other hand, the labor within the “non-academic” domain, which includes virtually all other institutional functions, is rendered non-theoretical and non-intellectual.

This binary explains why many universities classify honors colleges and programs as “non-academic” versus the degree-granting “academic” units of, for instance, business, arts and sciences, and engineering, even though the professionals in those colleges and programs carry the same credentials, teach similar course loads within internal honors curricula, and publish equivalent research. This binary is also implicitly at work in Smith's comprehensive study of the professionalization of honors (Smith, 2020). Smith argues that

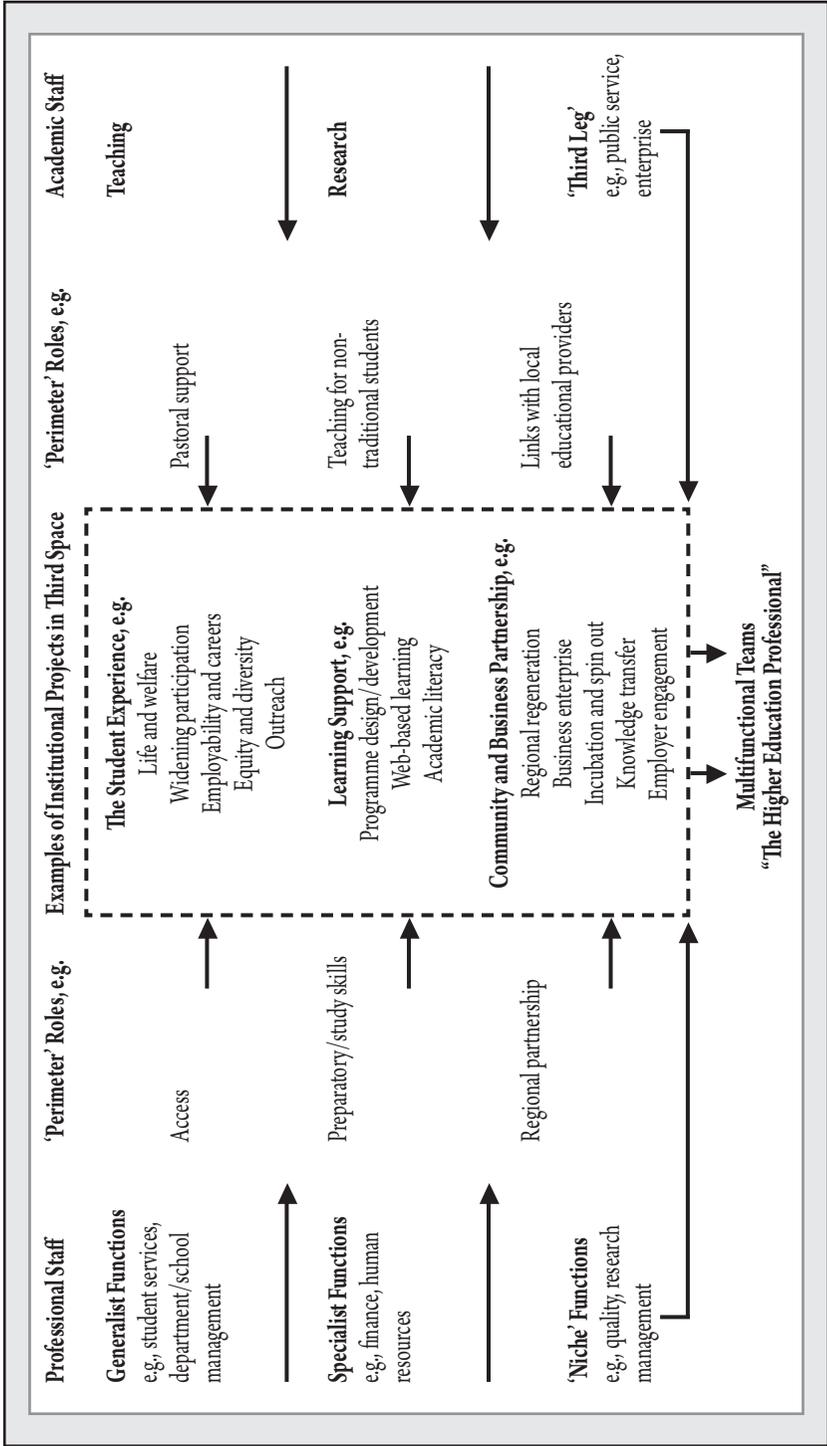
for honors to gain a legitimate professional foothold, it must move from the domain of “service” (i.e., the “non-academic”) to the domain of “disciplinary” (i.e., the “academic”). Only then, Smith concludes, will honors develop “the power and prestige of its academic standing” (p. 14). Smith is correct in suggesting that this tactic would bolster the efficacy of honors as a professional practice, but the fundamental question for those wanting to occupy the academy in the agential sense is not “How might we best assimilate into the university’s traditional epistemic economy?” but instead “Is the traditional economy adequate for the practice of honors?” I believe it is not.

In contrast to fitting honors into the preexisting epistemic economy of the academy and accepting the Procrustean consequences that inevitably follow, I believe honors must be reimaged in the context of what Homi Bhabha (2004) calls a “third space.” Nancy West has argued something similar in suggesting that we consider honors as a “third place” (2014; 2017); here West refers to honors as a nonbinary physical environment that is freed from the constraints of the university as traditionally conceived and that enables a certain kind of pedagogical and deliberative freedom (2014; 2017). In brief, third space is a concept used in social theory to explore identities and concepts that span, interweave, and disrupt traditional binaries. Third spaces are culturally hybrid spheres of multiple but shared identities that are constantly developed and renewed between cultures through dialogue (Bhabha, 2004). With a potential for disturbance and disruption, third spaces are also difficult and risky spaces on the edge, in-between, filled with contradictions and ambiguities, but they also create legitimate possibilities that are more than simple combinations of dualities (Soja and Hooper, 1993).

The concept of third space has been used in the study of dualisms such as the cultural geographies of east and west (Said, 1978), state and market (Bell, 1976), and high and low culture (Bourdieu, 1984) as well as race, gender, and class (Bhabha, 1990; Sarup, 1996). More recently, third space has also been used to understand forms of academic labor that blur professional categorizations inside an arena of negotiation, meaning, and representation (Routledge, 1996; Barnett & Di Napoli, 2007; Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007; Whitchurch 2013).

As illustrated by Whitchurch (Figure 1), third space professionals are often scholars trained in the theoretical and methodological traditions of the disciplines but who find those traditions too constraining or limiting to execute their work. They often produce traditional scholarship but are also praxis-driven, using their scholarly agenda as a tool and strategy to disrupt

FIGURE 1. THE BLENDING PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC SPHERES OF ACTIVITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THIRD SPACE PROFESSIONS



Source: Whitchurch, 2013, p. 25

and improve practice. They are also unlike traditional academics in that they work in highly collaborative ways and leverage the skill sets, perspectives, networks, and resources they possess in their administrative positions to push for transformative change (Janke, 2019). In almost all cases their work is aimed at improving, enriching, and transforming the education that takes place on their local campuses.

In my estimation, understanding honors as a legitimate third space rather than retrofitting it into the traditional epistemic fault lines of the academy is a significantly more adequate framework through which to conceptualize and build honors as an occupation.

TRANSDISCIPLINARITY AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF HONORS

If understanding honors as a third space clears a pathway for developing a nonbinary context for honors practice, a necessary consideration is the nature of the expertise that might be developed and cultivated in that space. For this, I suggest we turn to another nonbinary category that bears a close family resemblance to third-space labor: transdisciplinarity (Janke, 2019). Despite significant debate about the term “transdisciplinarity,” a widely recognized definition is that it is a form of engaged research that addresses complex social (i.e., “wicked”) problems (Augsburg, 2014) and, specifically, a process of developing what Gibbons et al. (1994) have termed “Mode 2” knowledge.

Gibbons et al. (1994) define Mode 1 knowledge as the kind of explanatory knowledge generated in a traditional, multi-, or inter-disciplinary context. Mode 1 research arises within an academic agenda and is ultimately accountable to the discipline or disciplines from which it draws. In many respects, Mode 1 captures the typical meaning of the term “research”: to produce universal knowledge and to build and test theory within a disciplinary field. The data produced are often context-free and validated by standards of logic, measurement, or consistency of prediction within the context of a traditional discipline.

Mode 2 knowledge, on the other hand, is embedded and applied, holding some of the following characteristics (see Table 1; Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 541–42).

- It is produced in the context of a particular *application* such that it has a practical focus, often a problem-solving one, that is relevant and useful to practitioners.

- It is *integrative*, meaning that it not only integrates different forms of disciplinary methods and theories but also integrates different skills, forms of understanding, and methods for problem solving that emerge and remain tightly connected to the central problem.
- It is characterized by *organizational diversity* as the work almost always occurs in teams that reflect disciplinary diversity and more significantly span the “academic” and “non-academic” binary.
- It is characterized by *social accountability*, where the primary locus of accountability is to practical outcomes and to the lived experience of participants.

Both third-space professionals and transdisciplinary researchers produce Mode 2 knowledge by taking a problem-driven approach to their work through direct engagement in ambiguous, real-world problems and situations. They collaborate with participants from different disciplines and societal sectors who are working from different assumptions, levels of understanding, types of knowledge, methodologies, and perspectives. As a result, they are not bounded by traditional labor categories; members of such teams have been referred to in general terms “as researchers, active agents, practitioners, managers, stakeholders, community partners, or actors (of the life world)” (Augsburg, 2014, p. 237).

TABLE 1. CONTRAST BETWEEN MODE 1 AND MODE 2 KNOWLEDGE

	Mode 1	Mode 2
Aim of Research	Universal knowledge, theory building, and testing within a discipline.	Knowledge produced to be deployed in the context of application.
Type of Knowledge Acquired	Universal law, primarily cognitive.	Particular, situational, embedded.
Nature of Data	Context free.	Contextually embedded.
Validation	Logic, measurement, or consistency of prediction and control.	Social or community impact.
Researcher's Role	Observer, accountable to disciplinary researchers.	Actor, agent of change, socially accountable.
Researcher's Relationship to Setting	Detached, neutral.	Immersed, reflexive.

In both third spaces and transdisciplinary spaces, embracing epistemic diversity has concrete effects on the work. Klein (2004) suggests that the most important difference between interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary projects is that the latter includes the intentional involvement of stakeholders in the definition of problems and those criteria, objectives, and resources used to analyze and resolve them. This epistemic widening also means that the work falls outside the Positivist criteria for rigor established in traditional disciplines, and it makes third space and transdisciplinary work susceptible to concerns about its quality, legitimacy, and value from those within traditional disciplinary frameworks (Toulmin, 1972; Schön, 1995; O’Meara, 2016). As a result, in both spaces, an element of professional risk is involved (Robinson, 2008). Subsequently, for professionals to succeed in both spaces, there must be a commitment to creating change as well as perseverance, tenacity, and a level of stubbornness to challenge the status quo within academia (Fam et al., 2017; Ramaley, 2000).

What I would like to suggest is that Mode 1 knowledge—the knowledge legitimated in the academy’s traditional epistemic economy—is inadequate for honors as an occupation because it severs theory from practice, reduces epistemic diversity, and thereby inhibits the transformational potential of our work. Accepting Mode 1 as our paradigm of expertise leads directly to a model of honors that simply recreates and reifies traditional models of university education. Mode 2 knowledge, on the other hand, is committed to innovative and exploratory applications of the disciplines that directly bridge and integrate diverse forms of understanding in the service of engaging complex, real-world problems; it fundamentally rejects the “academic” and “non-academic” binary and seeks out new, nonbinary, and holistic conceptualizations of academic practice. Mode 2 knowledge is the only form of expertise capable of disrupting, reimagining, and transforming the university, and only here will honors find its occupation.

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