

Writing as anchor: Fostering sustainable career pathways through knowledge production in Third Space

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Abstract

This conceptual paper extends the Process Model of Sustainable Careers (De Vos et al., 2020) by introducing identity expression as a fourth dimension, addressing a critical gap in understanding career sustainability for Third Space professionals in HE (Whitchurch and Healy, 2024). While the original model identifies person, context, and time as key dimensions contributing to three key indicators of health, happiness, and productivity, we argue that boundary-spanning roles often characterised by 'wiggly' career paths require active identity anchoring mechanisms. Writing, as knowledge production, serves as a form of identity expression for TS professionals by creating 'patterns of continuity' (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015, p. 7) across changing contexts and career transitions. Despite institutional liminality, knowledge production practices allow TS professionals to maintain coherent identities and sustainable careers. Our theoretical extension challenges conventional career sustainability frameworks, with considerable implications for supporting career development in increasingly fluid HE contexts.

Full paper

The ambiguous positioning of Third Space (TS) professionals (Whitchurch, 2008) – those operating between academic and professional domains in higher education institutions (HEIs) – presents unique challenges for career sustainability. While multiple career models applicable to the HE context exist, none of them directly respond to the needs of TS professionals, whose roles tend to offer considerable flexibility, but often lack established progression pathways, institutional recognition, and clear professional identities (Whitchurch and Healy, 2024). This conceptual paper proposes an extension to De Vos et al.'s (2020) well established Process Model of Sustainable Careers by introducing a fourth dimension of *identity expression*, which we consider a missing link in understanding the nature of TS career journeys. More specifically, we position writing as a knowledge

production practice serving as the primary manifestation of identity expression for TS professionals. The two accompanying papers in this symposium further explore the application of our enhanced model to other forms of knowledge production, including knowledge practices of Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) and curriculum design.

Sustainable careers are 'sequences of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity ... [that provide] meaning to the individual' (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015, p.7). De Vos et al.'s (2020) sustainability model conceptualises these patterns as characterised by three interconnected indicators: *health*, *happiness*, and *productivity*, which emerge through the dynamic interplay of three dimensions: *person* (agency and meaning-making), *context* (multiple environments that shape careers), and *time* (the temporal evolution of careers). While the model, with its assumption of relatively stable professional identities, offers a robust framework for analysing mainstream career pathways, it inadequately captures the 'structured improvisation' (Marshall, 2016, p.53) of the 'wiggly' trajectories of TS careers. TS professionals navigating less bounded roles exist in 'liminal states of in-between-ness and ambiguity' (Aguilar and Rütli-Joy, 2023, p.100), carrying an inherent mutability in identity formation that can represent a considerable threat to career sustainability. We argue that this limitation necessitates extending the model to account for how TS identity is not merely an outcome of the *person-context-time* interaction, but requires active *expression* and *anchoring* to stabilise this liminal identity.

Our extended sustainable TS careers model thus adds a fourth dimension: identity expression, with writing as its active manifestation. We argue that for TS professionals, writing as a form of identity expression may offer 'specificity, stability and coherence' (Cornelissen, Haslam and Balmer, 2007, p.57) to professional selfhood across shifting institutional contexts and role transitions. Identity expression integrates the other three dimensions of *person*, *context* and *time* by creating tangible artifacts that persist across contextual boundaries and temporal changes, anchoring the professional self. As such, this dimension is particularly critical for maintaining career sustainability in TS and allows us to more comprehensively analyse how sustainable careers develop for TS professionals across the three key indicators.

Firstly, the extended model reveals how writing as identity expression contributes to *health* by providing psychological resources for processing career challenges. When TS professionals engage in writing practices, they create opportunities for what we have previously termed 'liberatory practice' (Syska and Buckley, 2022) – writing that serves the writer's own developmental needs while contributing to collective knowledge. This supports

mental health by addressing the unique stressors of TS positions, including role ambiguity and limited institutional recognition.

The four-dimensional model also illuminates how writing enhances happiness by allowing TS professionals to articulate a coherent professional identity independent of role title or institutional positioning. By creating tangible expressions of professional self, writing solidifies the identity fluidity frequently experienced in TS positions (Buckley, Syska, and Heggie, 2024) and fosters a sense of professional integrity and purpose that transcends the positional liminality that can otherwise provoke a sense of disorientation (Aguilar and Rütting, 2023, p.101).

Finally, our enhanced model challenges narrow conceptions of *productivity* by demonstrating how diverse writing practices contribute to sustainable careers beyond traditional metrics, such as REF exercises in the UK context. For TS professionals, productivity encompasses not only performance within current roles but also development of transferable assets encompassing diverse genres and purposes that enhance career potential.

This conceptual extension to the sustainable careers model addresses a critical limitation in the existing theory by recognising that for professionals in boundary-spanning roles, active identity expression can be essential for career sustainability. While highlighting the importance of supporting different forms of knowledge production by TS professionals, it surfaces the value of intentional writing practices as a career sustainability strategy that works across all four dimensions to strengthen the key indicators of health, happiness and productivity.