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Curriculum Design as Identity Expression: Career Pathways for Third Space Professionals

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Drawing on the Process Model of Sustainable Careers, this paper proposes a study exploring how Third Space (TS) professionals with PhDs may experience curriculum design as a form of knowledge creation and identity expression that support career sustainability through health (well-being), happiness (career satisfaction), and productivity (impact and employability). Curriculum is frequently invisible in academic discourse, yet it is precisely in this invisibility that TS professionals find space for creativity, autonomy, and impact. Unlike traditional faculty who anchor their identities in teaching or research, or administrators whose identities are often role-bound, TS professionals can express their identity through curriculum design by creating programs, leading pedagogical work, and shaping learning frameworks. As a form of knowledge creation, curriculum becomes a key site for intellectual agency and meaning-making. Recognizing this identity expression as a fourth dimension of the Model deepens our understanding of how TS professionals sustain and thrive in their roles.

Full paper

1. Introduction

As higher education experiences a profound transformation globally (Altbach et. al., 2019), new identities are emerging for professionals occupying hybrid roles that transcend academic and administrative domains (Barnett and Di Napoli, 2007; Whitchurch, 2013). These individuals, often equipped with doctoral-level training but operating outside traditional tenure-track roles, reside in what Whitchurch (2008) introduced as the "Third Space." Drawing on the Process Model of Sustainable Careers (De Vos et al., 2020), this paper proposes identity expression as a fourth dimension of the model. Through working hypotheses, it explores how Third Space (TS) professionals with PhDs experience curriculum design as a form of knowledge creation that shapes their professional identity

and supports career sustainability through health (well-being), happiness (career satisfaction), and productivity (impact and employability).

2. Conceptual Framework

Three areas of scholarship inform this study. First, the Third Space captures professional roles that traverse across academic-administrative boundaries. These roles are fluid, often involving knowledge brokering, relationship building, and institutional problem-solving. TS professionals, often with PhDs and working closely with faculty, play a largely invisible but vital role in advancing the core missions of higher education (Derrick and Nickson, 2014; Szekeres, 2004; Kerridge et. al., 2023; Whitchurch and Healy, 2024). Second, the Process Model of Sustainable Careers views careers as evolving, contextually shaped processes. Sustainability is measured by individuals' ability to maintain happiness, health, and productivity over time. Importantly, the model centers both personal agency and environmental support, making it well-suited for examining the layered experiences of TS professionals (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015; Van der Heijde, et. al., 2020). Third, while typically seen as a practical engagement, curriculum-designing is also a site of "achievement" (Barnett and Coate, 2005: 3), involving epistemological decision-making, intellectual undertaking, and pedagogical innovation. When conceptualized this way, TS professionals engaged in curriculum design are not just implementing but generating new knowledge (Young, 2013), ultimately shaping educational values and institutional impact.

3. Hypotheses

Three hypotheses examine how PhD-trained professionals experience curriculum design as a form of knowledge creation that shapes identity expression and contributes to career sustainability.

Curriculum Design for Autonomy and Well-Being (Health)
TS professionals often receive limited recognition in traditional academia, which can undermine their roles and identities (Whitchurch, 2013). Yet, curriculum design offers a means to reclaim intellectual agency, fostering autonomy and well-being. Similar to how self-direction in student research promotes authentic partnerships with faculty (Nesbeth, 2015), giving TS professionals autonomy in designing training and resources can enhance their professional fulfillment. Given the inherently collaborative nature (Barnett and Coate,

2005), curriculum design facilitates knowledge dissemination, helping to create more empowering environments for TS professionals.

Curriculum Design as Knowledge-Based Career Satisfaction (Happiness)
Research-based education enriches learning (Carnell and Fung, 2017), and integrating research with teaching can inspire both students and educators (Arthur, 2014). Similarly, translating theory into practice could foster ownership and purpose, yielding deep satisfaction for TS professionals from incorporating research outcomes and pedagogical knowledge to solve educational challenges. Curriculum design, in this light, is not just task execution; it is a form of knowledge creation that brings a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

Curriculum Design for Impact and Employability (Productivity)
Curriculum design allows TS professionals to demonstrate productivity through measurable impact. By engaging in the "scholarship of curriculum" (Barnett and Coate, 2005), their work can extend beyond implementation to include leadership roles and formal initiatives that translate their contributions into professional capital. Like curators facilitating learning (Grindle and Thomas, 2017), TS professionals co-create knowledge. When aligned with institutional goals, curriculum can also drive broader social change (Milner, 2015). Recognizing curriculum design as an intellectual endeavor enhances their status, employability, and career sustainability.

4. Discussion

The diversity of the U.S. higher education system provides a rich context for exploring how doctoral-trained professionals experience curriculum design across institutional types and testing the proposed hypotheses. Often situated in Teaching and Learning Centers or similar units, these individuals operate at the academia-administration nexus. Curriculum is frequently invisible in academic discourse (Barnett and Coate, 2005), yet, it is precisely in this invisibility that TS professionals can express their professional identity through curriculum design by creating programs, leading pedagogical initiatives, or shaping learning frameworks. These activities make their values and professional selves visible in an often ambiguous or marginal space. As a form of knowledge creation, curriculum becomes a site for intellectual agency and meaning-making. Recognizing this identity expression as a fourth dimension of the De Vos model – alongside person, context, and time – likely deepens our understanding of how TS professionals sustain and thrive in their roles.