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Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Clarifying third space roles for more effective collaboration

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A growing number of third space practitioners work in academic developer (AD), educational technologist (ET) and learning designer (LD) roles in higher education to help academics navigate increasingly complex teaching practices. These specialist roles are referred to here as Educator Advisors (EdAdvisors). Inconsistent use of terminology and inaccurate role definitions for EdAdvisors can hinder the formation of sustainable collaborative relationships between EdAdvisors and academics by reducing understanding of their knowledge and skills. This mixed-methods study is comprised of a survey of EdAdvisors in 41 Australian higher education institutions and semi-structured interviews. It advances understanding of EdAdvisor roles by proposing descriptions which accommodate contextual differences within roles. Informed by a practice theory lens, it uses a combination of purposes, "practice bundles", and capability types to support a new framework for describing EdAdvisor roles that addresses existing issues with role clarity which have largely not been resolved by more competency-oriented approaches. These descriptions for the three EdAdvisor roles are intended to stimulate discussion about practical steps to build understanding of people working in these roles in order to facilitate more effective collaborative working relationships between EdAdvisors and academics as they work to co-create innovative educational experiences.

Keywords: third space, learning designer, academic developer, educational technologist, collaboration

Introduction

As the learning and teaching landscape grows in complexity with the emergence of new educational technologies (Marshall et al., 2024), time-poor university educators are expected to maintain their knowledge of associated teaching practices and find time to develop innovative approaches to teaching alongside their existing workloads (Lisewski, 2021). As a result, higher education institutions increasingly rely upon pedagogy and technology specialist educator advisors (EdAdvisors), working in higher education third space roles (Whitchurch, 2008) as academic developers (AD) (Mori et al., 2024), educational technologists (ET) (Shurville et al., 2008), and learning designers (LD) (Altena et al., 2025), to support and collaborate with academics in the co-creation of innovative educational experiences.

While skills and practices often overlap between EdAdvisor roles (Lotti et al., 2022), they collaborate with academics in purposefully different ways. Academic developers often bring a scholarly perspective to rethinking pedagogical aspects of an academic's teaching practice, advising on curriculum and assessment design and in-class teaching approaches (Wright & Zou, 2023). Educational technologists commonly advise on the affordances and use of available technologies in the university technology ecosystem and may work with educators to source alternatives as part of these collaborations (Simpson, 2023). Learning designers will work side-by-side with academics to help them to realise their goals for more innovation learning and teaching by designing and building best-practice educational resources and activities (Slade et al., 2019).

These collaborations can be time-intensive, and with limited numbers of EdAdvisors employed in teaching and learning centres (TLCs) (Wright, 2023), the sustainability of these collaborations depends upon intelligent management of time and staffing. The adage that when you only have a hammer, every problem looks like a nail is highly relevant in these situations. Given the diversity of purposes that ADs, ETs, and LDs support, having the right combination of these EdAdvisors available to work with academics and support broader learning and

teaching needs in the institution is essential. Ambiguity around the nature of EdAdvisor roles in the sector has been widely discussed and commonly relates to inconsistent use of role titles (Mitchell et al., 2017) and unclear role descriptions (Melling, 2019). When EdAdvisor roles are unclear, the most suitably skilled EdAdvisors may not be assigned or available to collaborate with academics on innovative educational

experiences (Drysdale, 2019). Similarly, a lack of understanding among academics of the purpose or expertise of some EdAdvisors, caused by this lack of clarity, can serve as a barrier to building the kind of trust-based relationships that these collaborations require (Sturm, 2022).

Issues with understanding of EdAdvisor roles have been documented in research for more than 50 years (Geis & Klaassen, 1972), and a substantial amount of work has been undertaken, particularly in the last decade, to define these roles (Arumugam, 2024; Slade et al., 2019; Veles et al., 2023). Much of this research has focused on the competencies of EdAdvisors (Gilmore & Nguyen, 2023; Hinze et al., 2022) yet this has led to seemingly little progress on finding sector-level consensus around role titles or descriptions. This paper proposes an expanded approach to describing EdAdvisor roles which adds purpose and practices to EdAdvisor competencies and accommodates contextual differences within roles.

Background

Many facets of EdAdvisor roles have been examined in research, addressing entry to the field (Mori et al., 2022), relationships with academics and other stakeholders (Pleschová et al., 2025), contributions to change (Stefaniak & Gilstrap, 2024), how their work is understood and valued (Simpson et al., 2021), and specialised aspects of their practice (Zeivots et al., 2023). Perhaps the largest section of research about people working in EdAdvisor roles has focused on describing the roles themselves, with a growing body of work focusing on EdAdvisors' competencies (Gilmore & Nguyen, 2023; Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2022; Pingo et al., 2024).

Competencies represent the skills and knowledge that EdAdvisors use to successfully undertake their work. These have been documented widely in the education sector for learning/instructional designers for several decades, largely focusing on LDs but also covering ETs and ADs. The International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction (IBSTPI) first developed a set of competencies for instructional/learning designers in 1986, followed by updates in 2000 and again in 2012. This most recent set identifies 22 competencies addressing understanding of professional communication, needs assessments, designing instructional interventions, and managing collaborative relationships (IBSTPI, 2012). Ritzhaupt and Kumar (2010) analysed 205 job postings and surveyed 231 educational technologists in their study to identify multimedia related competencies. More recent studies have also drawn on data from job advertisements (Pingo et al., 2024) and LinkedIn profiles (Gilmore & Nguyen, 2023) to build similar lists of competencies for EdAdvisors. Reliance on employment related data raises the question of whether understanding of these roles is informed more by the practitioners themselves or employer expectations of these roles. In addition to describing EdAdvisor roles, much of the recent research focusing on competencies is related to assessing the capabilities of (Gilmore & Nguyen, 2024) and designing the professional development of EdAdvisors (Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2022; Pingo et al., 2024), so it is unsurprising that competencies have been centred.

Two challenges can be found when primarily using competencies to describe or define EdAdvisor roles. Firstly, EdAdvisors in higher education are commonly employed either in centrally based units reporting to institutional leadership or in faculty based units aligned with a discipline area such as engineering or law (Han et al., 2023; Veles et al., 2023). These areas can have notably different priorities which the EdAdvisors are tasked with serving and the nature of the EdAdvisors' work, even within the same title of, for example, learning designer, can be notably different (Huang et al., 2021). This would suggest that competencies deemed essential for LDs in one context may not be as applicable or at least as highly valued as those in another context if they are being used to form definitions of these roles. It must be noted that some researchers have drawn on activities and practices in their work describing EdAdvisor roles and contexts (Altena et al., 2019; Green & Little, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2025; Slade et al., 2019) but these are less widely found. A second challenge with a focus on competencies alone is that it diminishes the agency of EdAdvisors in their professional identity. Trede and Jackson (2021) note that "deliberate professionals make conscious choices,

they take a stance, commit to action and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions" (p.2). Again, some discussion can be found of EdAdvisors' agency and values in the literature (Heggart, 2021; Stefaniak & Gilstrap, 2024) seeking to provide descriptions of EdAdvisor roles but it is less common.

Theoretical framework

There is currently no consensus in third space scholarship about a favoured theoretical lens. Mori et al. (2022) drew on identity theory, Abblitt (2024) preferred socio-materialism and Pingo et al. (2024) used lifelong learning theory. This study uses practice theory because practice has been explored for millennia by scholars seeking to understand the ways that our actions inform our identities, from Aristotle to Marx and beyond (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). The diversity of approaches to considering practice that this has resulted in means that "there is no one practice theory" (Kemmis, 2022, p.56) and accordingly, it is suggested that "to study practice empirically we are better served by a strategy based on deliberately switching between theoretical sensitivities" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 213). Key concepts from practice theories used in this paper to describe EdAdvisor roles include the teleoaffective structures of practice (Schatzki, 2002) which describe its purpose and the values of the practitioner; timespace, which relates to the when and where practices are commonly undertaken (Schatzki, 2002); the component parts of practice (doings, sayings, relatings) which describe the activities undertaken, knowledge needed and relationships involved (Kemmis et al., 2014); and the idea of practice bundles which describe interdependent and interrelated practices (Shove et al., 2012). The inclusion of purpose (teleoaffective structures) in considering the nature of and differences between EdAdvisors adds depth to understanding of these roles by acknowledging the agency of people undertaking this work and recognising that they are driven by their own values external to the tasks that they undertake. The doings, sayings and relatings of practices include the competencies commonly explored in other research in this space and add consideration of when and where practices are undertaken and how they relate to all of the parties involved in them.

Methods

This paper draws on research undertaken for my doctoral thesis (University of Sydney Human Ethics 2019/895 – Under examination). It used an abductive mixed methods approach comprised of a survey of 111 EdAdvisors working in 41 higher education institutions in Australia and semi-structured interviews with 16 EdAdvisors. Participants were recruited via forum and social media posts associated with the ASCILITE TELedvisors Network, HERDSA and similar communities. The survey was informed by a pilot survey of 72 participants in 21 higher education institutions and responses from the interviews. Relevant questions in this research related to the participants' role title, identification with one of the three EdAdvisor roles (AD, ET, or LD), and the strength of their association with those roles. The majority of participants identified as LDs (n=54), followed by ADs (n=33) and ETs (n=24). While role titles did not always align with role identification, a known issue with EdAdvisor roles, participants described their identification with roles on a scale of *1-100,* with results ranging from 73.42 (ADs) to 78.33 (ETs) to 83.96 (LDs). The difference between ADs and LDs on this measure was significant ($p = .009$). While the levels of role identification might be regarded as a limitation in this study, they reflect the issue of role clarity centred in this paper.

Participants were provided with a list of ten statements describing the purpose of EdAdvisor roles and asked to select the three which best applied to them. This related to the use of teleoaffective structures (Schatzki, 2002). These statements addressed purposes identified in the literature and in responses from interviewees, and they were also informed by my experience working as an EdAdvisor. Participants were also provided with a list of 36 common workplace activities for EdAdvisors and asked to select at least 7 which they believed were regularly performed by people in their EdAdvisor role. The development of this list of activities was informed by the literature, the pilot survey and responses from semi-structured interviews. During analysis of the data gathered from the survey and interviews, activities were categorised into practice bundles informed by the literature, the timespace in which they commonly occur, the stakeholders commonly involved (relatings), the purpose of the activity, whether they were interdependent and whether they were reactive or proactive. These practice bundles for EdAdvisor activities are presented in Table 1. Survey participants were asked to select at least 7 knowledge areas from a list of 28 that they believed are used by people in their EdAdvisor role. Similar to the

list of activities, the development of this list of knowledge areas was informed by the literature and responses to the pilot survey and semi-structured interviews. During analysis of the data, these knowledge areas were categorised as pedagogical, pedagogical-technological, technological, institutional, scholarly, and organisational. Relevant findings from these categories are presented in Table 2.

Considering the findings from these three questions and comparing them across the three EdAdvisor roles provides a multi-dimensional set of descriptors which can enable more effective categorisation into these roles informed by elements of their practices.

Findings

Using a combination of the findings relating to EdAdvisors' purpose (teleoaffective structures), practice bundles (doings) and knowledge areas (sayings) can provide greater insights into the nature of EdAdvisor roles by presenting a more integrative view of their practice.

Purpose

Discussion of purpose among interviewees in this study revealed four key themes which reflected the understanding of EdAdvisor purpose found in the literature: supporting good learning and teaching, capability building, change bringing, and compliance enforcing. These teleoaffective structures informed more granular options presented to survey participants and their responses to the question (Table 1) revealed key differences between roles. These differences between roles were almost all statistically significant, with three exceptions. Purposes which were selected by two-thirds or more of participants in a role are bolded.

Table 1
Purpose by EdAdvisor Role

Purpose	**AD%** (*n*=33)	**ET%** (*n*=24)	**LD%** (*n*=54)	**Sig.** (*p*)
Building staff capability	**79**	50	54	**0.035**
Driving innovation and change	55	**71**	57	0.428
Supporting innovation and change	30	**79**	54	**< .001**
Education technology governance	15	**67**	19	**< .001**
Ensuring/enhancing quality of education technology	12	**83**	41	**< .001**
Ensuring/enhancing quality of learning & teaching practice	**70**	50	**72**	0.146
Ensuring/enhancing quality of learning & teaching resources	24	58	**76**	**< .001**
Improving student learning experience	55	63	**93**	**< .001**
Supporting teaching staff	36	**79**	63	**0.004**
Supporting wider institutional needs	33	63	37	0.059

A high proportion of ADs in the study (70%) identified ensuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching practice as part of their purpose but fewer than one-quarter (24%) selected ensuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching resources, indicating that they perceive clear boundaries around their work. Building staff capability was the only other purpose that a high proportion of ADs selected (79%). Survey results indicated that very few ADs viewed working with education technology as part of their purpose. In contrast, significantly higher proportions of ETs selected purposes relating to education technologies (education technology governance 67% and ensuring and enhancing the quality of education technology 83%) as well as driving (71%) or supporting (79%) innovation and change. Another notable difference between ETs and ADs was the high proportion of ETs who reported supporting teaching staff (79%) as part of their purpose compared to ADs (36%). This may indicate different types of relationships between ETs and academics and ADs and academics. Improving student learning experience was selected by significantly more LDs (93%) than by ADs (55%) or ETs (63%). This was also the highest proportion of any role that selected any purpose. It suggests the student-centred mindset of LDs in this study and indicates that the motivators of their other highly selected purposes, ensuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching practice (72%) and ensuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching resources (76%) are primarily grounded in their concern for

students. Nearly two-thirds of LDs in this study also reported supporting teaching staff (63%) as part of their purpose, but the student learning experience is their clear priority.

Practice Bundles

Frequent overlaps between activities identified by survey participants meant that categorising them into practice bundles was a more effective way to discuss these practices and link them to purposes. Activities reported as regularly undertaken by at least two-thirds of participants in a role are bolded.

Table 2
Practice Bundles by EdAdvisor Role

Practice bundle	**Activity**	**AD %** (*n* = 33)	**ET %** (*n* = 24)	**LD %** (*n* = 54)
Build learning resources/activities	Audio/video production	21.2	**66.7**	51.9
	Multimedia/web development	9.1	62.5	59.3
	Use LMS - add content	48.5	**66.7**	**81.5**
	Use LMS - build activities	36.4	**66.7**	**85.2**
Building capability	Deliver training to academic staff	**87.9**	**79.2**	**83.3**
	Deliver workshops to academic staff	**93.9**	**75.0**	**83.3**
	Design academic staff training	**84.8**	**70.8**	**74.1**
	Design academic staff workshops	**87.9**	**70.8**	**75.9**
	Support resource development	60.6	**83.3**	**87.0**
Design teaching and learning	Assessment design	**87.9**	20.8	**85.2**
	Curriculum design	**87.9**	8.3	**66.7**
	Learning activity design	**66.7**	20.8	**94.4**
	Learning resource design	**69.7**	50.0	**96.3**
Facilitate education technologies	Advising on education technology	60.6	**87.5**	**79.6**
	Design digital learning environments	33.3	**91.7**	**96.3**
	Design physical learning environments	54.5	45.8	44.4
	Education technology procurement	15.2	**79.2**	20.4
	Evaluate education technology	51.5	**83.3**	**70.4**
	Implement education technology	39.4	**87.5**	**70.4**
	Non-academic research	36.4	**79.2**	**81.5**
	Work with vendors	9.1	**70.8**	27.8
Quality management of teaching	Advising on pedagogy	**97.0**	33.3	**81.5**
	Develop teaching strategies	**93.9**	16.7	**79.6**
	Ensuring compliance with policy	**75.8**	**70.8**	**81.5**
	Evaluate learning resources	**84.8**	58.3	**92.6**
	Evaluate teaching practice	**90.9**	12.5	55.6
	Support use of learning analytics data	63.6	**79.2**	**70.4**
Relationship and care work	Provide emotional support	**78.8**	**75.0**	**75.9**
	Relationship building	**97.0**	**75.0**	**98.1**
Research	Academic research	**93.9**	20.8	33.3
Technical support	Technical support	6.1	**87.5**	50.0
	Use LMS - course administration	42.4	**75.0**	53.7
Organisational	Driving change	**90.9**	**66.7**	**88.9**

	Problem solving	**97.0**	**87.5**	**98.1**
	Project management	**78.8**	62.5	**94.4**
	Troubleshooting	**69.7**	**87.5**	**77.8**

The findings in Table 2 highlight that EdAdvisors in all roles undertake many of the same activities as their colleagues in other roles. Nonetheless, by considering them in terms of practice bundles, it is possible to see overall qualities to their practices which differentiate them from other roles. In Table 3, practice bundles reported to be undertaken by a majority of participants in all roles are coloured yellow and where not all roles are associated with a bundle, the roles are coloured blue for ADs, orange for ETs and green for LDs. This also highlights overlaps between roles.

Table 3
Practice Bundles by EdAdvisor Role

Practice Bundles	**AD**	**ET**	**LD**
Build capability			
Build learning resources/activities			
Design teaching and learning			
Nurture learning and teaching culture			
Facilitate education technologies			
Quality management of teaching			
Relationships and care work			
Research			
Technical support			
Organisational			

Note: All ADs ETs LDs

Building capability, quality management of teaching, relationships and care work, and organisational practices are common to all EdAdvisor roles. ADs are distinguished by their work to nurture learning and teaching culture and undertaking scholarly research and also design teaching and learning. ETs are distinguished by their work in providing technical support, as well as facilitating educational technologies and building learning resources and activities. LDs share building learning resources and activities and facilitating educational resources with ETs and designing teaching and learning with ADs.

Knowledge areas

While the responses to the question about knowledge areas (referred to elsewhere as competencies) commonly used by EdAdvisor roles were assigned to one of six categories, it is the findings in the pedagogical, pedagogical-technological, and technological categories which are the most informative. These are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Knowledge areas by EdAdvisor Roles

Category	**Knowledge area**	**AD %** (*n* = 33)	**ET %** (*n* = 24)	**LD %** (*n* = 54)
	Pedagogical theory	**100.0**	45.8	**92.6**
	Assessment design principles	**97.0**	12.5	**83.3**
	Curriculum structures	**93.9**	0.0	**64.8**
	Good practice in face-to-face learning and teaching	**87.9**	25.0	**79.6**

	Discipline specific learning and teaching practices	**81.8**	16.7	**72.2**
Pedagogical	Learning design models and principles	**78.8**	37.5	**98.1**

Category	**Knowledge area**	**AD %** (*n* = 33)	**ET %** (*n* = 24)	**LD %** (*n* = 54)
	Good practice in blended learning and teaching	**84.8**	**70.8**	**98.1**
Pedagogical-	Good practice in online learning and teaching	**84.8**	**75.0**	**100.0**
Technological	Good use of education tech in learning and teaching	**72.7**	**91.7**	**96.3**
	Current and emerging education technologies	60.6	**91.7**	**85.2**
	User experience (UX) and accessibility principles	42.4	**75.0**	**88.9**
	Multimedia/web design principles	27.3	**79.2**	**72.2**
	Use of multimedia/web tools	21.2	**79.2**	**68.5**
	Video production and editing	9.1	**70.8**	51.9
Technological	General IT systems and processes	21.2	**83.3**	40.7

Participants in academic developer roles predominately reported using pedagogical knowledge in their work, and to a lesser extent pedagogical-technological knowledge. This contrasts with educational technologists, who more often reported using pedagogical-technological and technological knowledge. Learning designers reporting using knowledge across all three of these categories, reiterating their all-rounder status.

Discussion

While the three third space EdAdvisor roles discussed in this paper clearly share many competencies, practices and purposes, the findings indicate that these three characteristics also illustrate distinguishing qualities of these roles. When considered collectively, these characteristics may contribute to developing a framework to describe these roles that offers much-needed clarity and address limitations in approaches which have focused primarily on competencies, or which fail to accommodate contextual differences within roles. An example of such a framework is presented in Table 5

Table 5
Integrated Model for Describing EdAdvisor Roles

Role	**Practice bundles**	**Competencies**	**Purpose**
AD	• Design teaching and learning • Nurture learning and teaching culture • Research	• Pedagogical • Pedagogical-technological	• Building staff capability • Ensuring/enhancing quality of learning and teaching practice
ET	• Build learning resources/activities • Facilitate education technologies • Technical support	• Pedagogical-technological • Technological	• Driving innovation and change • Supporting innovation and change • Education technology governance • Ensuring/enhancing quality of ed tech • Supporting teaching staff
LD	• Build learning resources/activities	• Pedagogical,	• Ensuring enhancing quality of learning and teaching practice

In providing greater clarity of third space EdAdvisor roles, more effective collaborative partnerships between EdAdvisors and academics may be enabled as institutional leaders will be better equipped to ensure that appropriate and adequate staffing is available to support innovative learning and teaching initiatives. Greater clarity about the purpose, values, practices and competencies of EdAdvisors can also contribute to greater confidence in the academics who work with these EdAdvisors.

Conclusion

Role clarity has long been a challenge in building understanding of EdAdvisors working in the higher education third space. The rapid growth of scholarly research in recent years seeking to address this highlights the breadth of this concern and the rising interest among third space practitioners undertaking this research in their professional identities and ability to contribute meaningfully to learning and teaching in tertiary education. In order to move beyond these issues, it is necessary for some degree of consensus on the nature of EdAdvisor roles to be found. This would ideally provide a foundation for wider efforts to apply consensus definitions (and titles) for these roles in the higher education sector – as far as this may be possible.

It is hoped that this study may inspire further discussion about developing integrative models which can be used to describe and clarify EdAdvisor roles. Validation of the findings in this study drawing on larger samples is one area for further research, alongside continuing the ongoing conversation in the sector about opportunities to find a common set of descriptors for these roles.

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