

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Beyond support: Third space professionals as scholars through structured mentoring

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This panel challenges the persistent framing of third space professionals as research support rather than research leaders. Grounded in Whitchurch's third space theory, Wenger's communities of practice, and Boyer's model of scholarship, we examine how structured mentoring through the 2025 ASCILITE Community Mentoring Program (CMP), the Research Mentorship Program for Third Space in partnership with the Learning Design SIG, enables learning designers and academic developers to engage in sustained scholarly inquiry. Panel contributors will share narratives of identity transformation, research emergence, and boundary-crossing practices that illuminate both enablers and constraints shaping third space scholarship. We propose that third space professionals are uniquely positioned to lead educational transformation through practice-based inquiry. Through facilitated dialogue, attendees will surface institutional conditions and co-develop strategies to sustain scholarly development. By reconceptualising mentoring as a community of practice, this panel demonstrates how CMP fosters the shift from peripheral participation to active scholarly leadership.

Keywords: third space, scholarly identity, research mentoring, learning design, professional development

Background and rationale

Third space professionals occupy a hybrid domain between academic and professional roles (Whitchurch, 2008), yet their contributions to institutional research cultures are often undervalued as mere 'support'. Learning designers, educational developers, and others in blended roles frequently operate outside formal research pathways, limiting access to recognition, mentoring, and scholarly identity development. This under-

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recognition persists despite their increasing leadership in pedagogical transformation and SoTL. Research has highlighted how third space professionals must actively navigate role ambiguity, negotiate identity, and legitimise their contributions in the absence of clear academic status (Smith, Holden, Yu, & Hanlon, 2021). These conditions point to the need for institutional models that support scholarly identity formation in liminal roles. One response is structured mentoring programs that foster access to research culture, identity development, and peer-based affirmation. Such communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) can provide social learning environments for those seeking to transition from practice to publication. The 2025 ASCILITE CMP, developed in partnership with the Learning Design SIG, exemplifies such a model. This panel brings together CMP mentors and mentees to explore how mentoring-as-community fosters identity reconstruction and research emergence for third space professionals. The session aligns with ASCILITE's emphasis on inclusive, future-focused educational partnerships and sustainable professional development.

Theoretical frameworks

This panel draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks:

1. Third space theory (Whitchurch, 2008) highlights the hybrid identities of learning designers and academic developers, challenging binary distinctions between academic and professional roles.
2. Communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) positions the CMP as a social learning environment where mentees develop scholarly identity through participation, mentoring, and peer exchange.
3. Boyer's model of scholarship (Boyer, 1990) broadens the definition of legitimate research, recognising diverse scholarly contributions across discovery, integration, application, and teaching, central to third space practice.

Panel structure and content

The 55-minute session will comprise:

- Opening framing (5 mins): Establishing the need to reposition third space professionals as scholars, introducing the theoretical frameworks and CMP context.
- Panellist contributions (25 mins):
Panellists will speak to complementary aspects of third space research engagement, each aligned with one or more of the panel's theoretical lenses:
 - A model of mentoring as a community of practice, highlighting social learning and scholarly identity formation.
 - A personal narrative of identity transformation through reflective research engagement.
 - A critique of institutional structures using Boyer's scholarship model to foreground third space contributions.
 - Insights into the cultural and systemic conditions shaping third space professionals' access to scholarly recognition.
- Interactive audience engagement (15 mins): Participants will collaboratively surface local enablers, barriers, and potential institutional interventions through a shared digital workspace. Facilitators will intentionally structure this activity to ensure inclusion of diverse voices, particularly from underrepresented institutional contexts.
- Synthesis and invitation (10 mins): Collective reflection and an invitation to connect with the CMP and Learning Design SIG for ongoing research mentoring and collaboration.

Panel members and views

This panel includes contributors from the 2025 ASCILITE Community Mentoring Program (CMP), the Research Mentorship Program for Third Space in partnership with the Learning Design SIG. Panellists bring diverse expertise and institutional perspectives across learning design, curriculum development, and academic development. Their collaborative research explores themes such as program-level assessment, assessment rubric design, curriculum change leadership, and institutional responses to emerging capabilities in third space roles.

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Intended audience, outcomes and takeaways

Audience: Learning designers, educational developers, educational technologists, third space professionals, academic leaders, and those engaged in institutional capability-building.

Outcomes:

- Develop understanding of third space theory as a lens for scholarly identity and institutional positioning.
- Explore structured mentoring as a model for research capacity-building in hybrid roles.
- Engage with practical examples of scholarly engagement emerging from third space practice.
- Identify enabling conditions for supporting the transition from practice to publication.
- Consider implications for institutional policy and strategy, including promotion frameworks, recognition of third space scholarship, and capacity-building initiatives.

Key takeaways:

- Third space professionals are well-positioned to lead, not just support, educational research.
- Mentoring-as-community is an effective and sustainable approach to scholarly identity development.
- Institutional cultures must broaden their definitions of scholarship to recognise diverse academic contributions.
- Peer-based structures are essential for sustaining inclusive research engagement across role boundaries.

References

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