



## Wearing many hats: Leading complex projects

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### ABSTRACT

This case study critically reflects on the leadership of a complex digital teacher education project undertaken within a Russell Group institution's Initial Teacher Education (ITE) department. Using Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle as a framework, it examines the first year of the project across four strands (themes): Mentoring, Digital Communities of Practice, Reusable Learning Objects, and Student Experience and Quality Assurance to explore how leadership practices evolved in response to shifting institutional, pedagogical, and relational demands.

The analysis demonstrates how navigating competing priorities, managing diverse expectations, and addressing emergent challenges required adaptive, emotionally informed, and relational forms of leadership. Drawing on third space literature, the case study illustrates how the project lead moved between bounded and unbounded professional identities, undertaking hybrid, boundary-crossing work that integrated academic, professional, and digital domains. Insights from the four strands highlight the importance of trust-building, reflective practice, and iterative problem-solving when leading digital transformation in Higher Education (HE). The study concludes by outlining transferable lessons for colleagues undertaking similarly complex, cross-boundary initiatives and argues that third-space orientations are essential for sustaining meaningful educational change.

**Keywords:** third space, unbounded, critical Friend, leader/co-leader, complex projects

### Introduction

As Head of Digital Learning in a school that delivers Initial Teacher Education (ITE) at a Russell Group institution, I lead projects that embed innovative Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) approaches into school programmes.

One of the departments within the school delivers Postgraduate Taught programmes to graduates seeking Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Its Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programmes equip students to teach in the Early Years, Primary and Secondary phases, locally, nationally, and internationally.

Whitchurch (2009, p. 407) defines third space professionals as those "with identities drawn from both professional and academic domains." The concept of the third space helps to illustrate the hybrid or boundary crossing nature of roles such as mine, which do not sit neatly within traditional academic or administrative domains. Whitchurch (2008) argues that third space professionals often reconstruct boundaries rather than simply operating within them, creating new domains of practice in response to institutional needs and emerging pedagogical priorities. In digital learning leadership, this boundary work frequently involves translating between academic values, professional service practices, and institution-wide technological change.

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Veles, et al. (2019, p. 1) build on Whitchurch's definition by emphasising the collaborative dimensions of third space work. They describe third space professionals as "complex collaboration champions," operating across structural, cultural, and disciplinary domains. This requires negotiation, relationship building, and the capacity to lead through influence rather than positional authority. Their research also highlights the emotional labour and identity work involved in sustaining credibility in multiple communities, something particularly evident in digital learning contexts where innovation intersects with diverse professional expectations.

Here, I reflect upon my leadership of a complex five-year project that required me to operate at the intersection of professional, academic, technical, and relational domains, to bring the first year of the project to a successful conclusion. By situating my reflections within the literature on third space identities and collaborative boundary work, I highlight how this project demanded not only technical expertise but also the hybrid, integrative practices characteristic of third space professionalism (Whitchurch, 2009).

This case study is useful for others to read because it offers transferable insight into leading complex, digital change in HE that is grounded in both theory and practice. Through operationalising Mintzberg's (1973) roles (interpersonal, informational, and decisional) in a real HE context, it illustrates how leaders can fluidly move between the roles when teams are small and outcomes are emergent. Using Kolb's cycle as a framework for improvement and ensuring the reflections lead to concrete actions demonstrates how reflective insight can be translated into changes in practice.

### Context

Following a 20% rise in PGCE student recruitment post-Covid, the department saw a significant fall in applications and enrolments. Based upon current recruitment data this appears to be a continuing sector-wide trend. The Department for Education Initial Teacher Education (ITE) market review and subsequent ITE reaccreditation process have destabilised the sector and created recruitment uncertainty (Noble-Rogers, 2022). If the number of teachers year on year leaving the profession (Adams, 2023), current teacher workload pressures (Malm, 2020) and ongoing pay disputes (National Education Union, 2024) are factored in, the ITE recruitment market can be described as fragile (NIESR, 2024). This context has evolved since the department began a strategy renewal process where its Senior Leadership Team (where I have no positional authority) identified several challenges to extending its portfolio and expertise, including how to:

- utilise its expertise in online and blended learning on all its programmes.
- offer cost-effective teacher training in geographically dispersed, hard to recruit to locations where "in person" attendance at University sessions is not possible.
- compete with other digital teacher education providers who offer a lower cost model approach to ITE.

Consequently, there was a need to find a departmental solution to mitigate these issues and hence the Digital Teacher Education Project (DTEP) was born. For the purposes of this case study the DTEP can be described as a complex challenge rather than a complicated one as it contained many interdependent elements, some of which were unknown and others that changed over time in unpredictable ways (Zucker & Rowell, 2021).

### The Digital Teacher Education Project (DTEP)

I was tasked with leading the DTEP by the Senior Leadership Team and additionally chose to take on the role of Project Facilitator, as I believed that the outcomes of the project were largely intangible and emergent at that stage (Cox, 2021). In this capacity, I operated across all three categories of Mintzberg's (1973) managerial roles, as outlined by Tovmasyan (2017). I was given responsibility for developing the DTEP processes, which constituted a decisional role involving strategic design and resource allocation. I also facilitated meetings with partners, an interpersonal role characterised by liaison work, relationship building, and the coordination of multiple perspectives. Alongside this, I maintained oversight of progress toward the strategic priorities, fulfilling an informational role that required monitoring developments, synthesising emerging insights, and disseminating information to ensure alignment across the project.

I was co-opted as a member of the DTEP Board, a position that combined interpersonal responsibilities such as representing the project and influencing discussions, with decisional responsibilities, including shaping direction and negotiating priorities. Additionally, I was responsible for recruiting staff onto the DTEP, again drawing on both interpersonal competence and decisional authority. My work on the DTEP required continuous movement across these interconnected roles, reflecting the psychological and organisational complexity highlighted by Tovmasyan (2017). I recognise that it is unusual for one person to take on all these roles, but it was necessary due to the size of the core DTEP team (eight individuals across the four strands), their existing skill set, and the responsibilities I was given.

I facilitated an initial half-day workshop to articulate the strategic priorities behind the DTEP using Agile project management methodology (Highsmith, 2009). I chose this methodology because the DTEP was both an iterative and an incremental process (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2008). The challenges to achieving the strategic priorities were complex and I believed that their solutions would emerge through collaboration and working in cross-phase teams (Palmer-Trew & Taylor, 2019).

Cross-phase teams comprise academic staff that teach on the Primary and Early Years phase and academic staff who teach on the Secondary phase. The outcome of this workshop was the establishment of four DTEP strands (themes) and the identification of strand leads and members. The themes were chosen by the workshop attendees and endorsed by the department's Senior Leadership team.

This case study draws on Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) to critically examine my work across these project strands and to illustrate the range of leadership roles I was required to adopt to bring the first year of this five-year initiative to a successful conclusion. Kolb's model positions learning as a cyclical process involving four interdependent stages (Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation, and Active Experimentation) all of which were evident throughout this stage of the project.

Through the concrete experiences of leading diverse teams, coordinating colleagues and partners, and responding to emergent challenges, I encountered multiple leadership demands that shifted according to context from directive decision-making to more facilitative, collaborative approaches. These experiences provided the foundation for the subsequent reflective stages of the cycle. Engaging in reflective observation enabled me to step back from the day-to-day pressures of delivery and interrogate how and why particular leadership behaviours were effective or ineffective. This process involved critically examining interpersonal

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dynamics, institutional constraints, and my own assumptions about authority, influence, and communication within cross-phase teams.

Moving into abstract conceptualisation, I synthesised these reflections with established theories of educational leadership and change management. This allowed me to make sense of the varied leadership positions I occupied, ranging from project facilitator to critical friend to strategic advocate and to conceptualise how adaptive leadership practices support complex, digital transformation initiatives.

Finally, through active experimentation, I translated these insights into revised approaches for the next phases of the project. This included refining communication strategies, redistributing responsibilities, and adopting new facilitation techniques to better support colleagues and sustain momentum. By iteratively applying these adjustments, Kolb's cycle not only frames my reflection but also guides my ongoing professional learning within this evolving leadership context.

### Critical reflections

#### Strand one: Mentoring

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The members of this strand wanted to consider how the department could provide video technology for students and mentors to easily record and share video content and to encourage mentors to use instructional coaching principles during their mentoring sessions to support students' learning (Knight, 2021). Mentors are experienced schoolteachers who work with the department to help ensure students receive appropriate training whilst on their placements (Department for Education, 2016).

#### *My experience*

My role within this strand was that of a critical friend (Mat Noor and Shafee, 2020). I challenged the strand team to justify their choice of software and to better explain how they planned to evaluate its effectiveness when observing students' teaching practice. Given that using video recording software had significant implications for the department's quality assurance processes, I encouraged them to consider how they could embed the use of the software during the planning stage of curriculum development rather than just adding it at the end. I therefore advised them to create and add specific video capture activities to the PPUs to support the development of students' teaching practice. Professional Practice Units (PPUs) are on-placement experiences designed to integrate provider-led and in school-experiences. These video activities support alternative assessment practices and provide opportunities for students to submit non-text-based work for assessment to gain credit. They also develop students' use of slow looking (Pantaleo, 2019) which benefits their reflective practice and critical thinking skills.

#### *My reflections*

Reflecting on some of the challenges I faced with this strand, I realised that I was experiencing a conflict between acting as a critical friend for the staff involved and sitting on the Project Board. As a critical friend I was supposed to be a supportive person who could ask difficult questions to encourage critical thinking, but I found that I was not neutral in this process. I had background knowledge that the other strand members did not have, and I felt I was regularly being pulled in opposing directions. My difficult questions were being driven by the discussions taking place at Project Board, they were not really my' difficult questions at all.

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*My learning*

Recognising my lack of neutrality was a turning point for me. I could not step back from this role, so I decided to step forward instead. By asking the staff to justify why they wanted to use a particular piece of software, I was firstly asking the question on behalf of the Project Board, but I was also asking it on behalf of a mentor - someone who had no say in the project process but who would inevitably end up dealing with the consequences of any recommendations that the strand made.

*Applying my learning*

I felt much more comfortable with this, and I think accepting my multi-faceted role enabled me to ask more effective difficult questions. I used the third space, the intersection between my role on the Project Board and my role as a critical friend to the strand team (Tatham-Fashanu, 2021) to push the team to consider how they could embed the software in the planning stages of the programme and changed the nature of the PUs, making them more relevant for students and mentors.

**Strand two: Digital Communities of Practice (DCOP)**

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The purpose of this strand was to establish good practice guidance to facilitate the exchange of ideas and expertise among the department's partners, allowing them to learn from one another and to stay up to date with the latest developments in their field, irrespective of their location.

A community of practice is defined by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015, para. 5) as a group of people who "share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." A digital community of practice follows the same principles but operates online (Sibbald et al., 2022). It offers the advantage of connecting diverse individuals regardless of location or time constraints.

*My experience*

As co-lead for this strand, I applied for and obtained funding to engage a subject matter expert to develop and promote a DCOP on Rainbow Allies (visible supporters of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more (LGBTQUIA+) community). This topic was chosen by the strand because schools are required to include LGBTQUIA+ teaching and learning opportunities in their curricula (RSE, 2019). Despite mandatory LGBTQUIA+ curriculum elements in the PGCE programmes, there is a gap in authentic learning and student engagement (DeMink-Carthew, 2018) which the strand hoped that the Rainbow Allies DCOP would fill. Booth (2012) comments that fostering and sustaining knowledge sharing, and trust are some of the most difficult challenges DCOPs face, and this certainly proved to be the case for this DCOP. Interest was minimal.

*My reflections*

From my perspective this strand struggled with its remit from the outset. Whilst the decision to focus on communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) was straightforward, I felt that there was too much reliance on one topic at the exclusion of other perhaps more relevant topics. Having secured the funding to engage a subject matter expert on Rainbow Allies I recognise that I was complicit in this problem, but for a considerable amount of time the strand appeared to be solely focused on making one DCOP work at the exclusion of all others.

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*My learning*

By consulting the wider literature for solutions and finding the work of Booth (2012) and Bourhis et al. (2005) I was able to persuade the other members of the strand that we needed to widen our scope. Once again, I recognised the importance of stepping away from the current situation, but in this case, it was about stepping back rather than stepping forward. By considering the students' needs in this process rather than the agenda of the individuals most closely involved in the strand work, I was able to make positive changes and move the work of the strand forward.

*Applying my learning*

I suggested to the team that member familiarity (Adams et al., 2016) could be affecting uptake, as many of the department's partners were not familiar with Rainbow Allies or with the staff involved in the community. From a third space perspective, unfamiliarity is a common challenge. Whitchurch (2008) notes that professionals operating in hybrid, cross-boundary roles often need to construct new relational spaces to build trust and legitimacy across diverse groups. With this in mind, I advised the subject matter expert to create informal opportunities for interested colleagues to meet outside the Rainbow Allies moniker, enabling relationship-building before asking participants to engage with the DCOP itself.

To support this further, I asked the school's Digital Learning Officer to pilot a web-conferencing platform that could serve as an informal digital third space where individuals could connect without the pressure of joining a formalised community. I also encouraged the strand to revisit whether the choice of topic (Wenger et al., 2002) was appropriate, and to reflect on how and when to embed DCOP activity within the PGCE programmes (Bourhis et al., 2005). As a result, the strand broadened the available online communities to include topics such as dyslexia and students with caring responsibilities, and incorporated time during induction for establishing DCOPs at the start of the programme. This broader, more inclusive approach aligned with third-space thinking, which emphasises fluidity, permeability, and responsiveness to emergent needs across professional and academic boundaries.

**Strand three: Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs)**

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The purpose of this strand was to establish an evidence-informed process for developing a collection of RLOs built around the department's values of social justice, intellectual curiosity, and creativity. RLOs are small, electronic, instructional design components that can be used for multiple purposes, often with little or no editing (Pappas, 2016). The development of this collection would enable the department to utilise its expertise in online and blended learning on all its programmes and to offer cost-effective teacher training resources in geographically dispersed locations.

*My experience*

As the strand lead, I developed and led Continuing Professional Development (CPD) workshops that supported and encouraged teaching staff to think in more nuanced ways about the asynchronous learning materials that they produced for their sessions. I arranged for staff to work in cross-phase groups to develop resources on topics that were taught on both the Primary and Secondary phases. The impact of my work is that the department has a growing collection of RLOs available for staff to use on any PGCE programme across all five core areas of the ITE Core Content Framework.

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I also encouraged staff to make RLOs for use in the PPU. Students are expected to share these with their mentors in schools. This enables the department to showcase the kind of work that it is undertaking to mentors who can then refer to it in their coaching meetings with their students. I developed comprehensive evidence-based guidance on how to produce RLOs which is available for all the department's partners. I also led a variety of dissemination events both within the wider institution and externally e.g., the Association for Learning Technology annual conference.

*My reflections*

Feedback from these dissemination events was very positive with attendees expressing particular interest in using RLOs to optimise student engagement (Heilporn, et al., 2021). This experience made me realise how important the dissemination process is when participating in projects as it is easy to focus on the minutiae of the project at the exclusion of the wider picture.

*My learning*

Brookfield (1995) talks about the importance of challenging assumptions, and I experienced this firsthand at a Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers conference. I had assumed that because everyone in the audience was a practitioner, they would understand what a RLO was. This was not the case and consequently I have changed my practice. Whenever I communicate with a new audience, I always explain what RLOs are before going into any further detail.

*Applying my learning*

I found managing the work of this strand the easiest. Firstly, I was the strand lead, which gave me more autonomy than the work on some of the other strands, and secondly, it had a clear and highly specific focus. RLOs were needed for a new online programme the department was developing, and this focus created an initial momentum that the other strands perhaps did not benefit from.

As Brookfield (1995, p. 159) observes, academic staff work in an environment that is “emotionally draining, physically tiring, and financially unrewarding.” Asking staff to create RLOs in addition to their existing workload, without a well-defined purpose, could easily have been unproductive. However, because many departmental colleagues were already expected to produce content for the new online programme, their engagement did not require negotiation; it was simply part of their ongoing work. This enabled me to devote more of my time to supporting the planning and pedagogical design of the RLOs rather than managing participation and as such reduced my emotional labour load (Velas, et al., 2019).

On reflection, I also recognise that my role in this strand carried many features associated with third space practice. Whitchurch (2008) describes third-space work as occurring at the intersection of academic, professional, and digital domains, where individuals mediate between institutional priorities and the practical realities of teaching and learning. Leading the development of RLOs required similar forms of boundary-crossing: interpreting institutional ambitions for online provision, translating these into workable guidance for academic staff, and supporting colleagues to develop confidence in digital design practices. This hybrid, cross-boundary position helped me to see where staff needed clarity, where systems required adaptation, and how best to scaffold the creation of high-quality RLOs. Integrating insights from the third-space literature has therefore strengthened my understanding of why this strand progressed more smoothly than others. Its clearly defined purpose aligned well with the kind of creative, relational, and facilitative work that third-space roles typically inhabit.

#### **Strand four: Student Experience and Quality Assurance (QA)**

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The purpose of this strand was to provide recommendations for the purchase of a digital data management system for the work-based learning elements of the QTS programmes. This would enable the department to increase and disseminate its wider educational impact irrespective of where its students and mentors were located. It would also enable the department to compete with other cheaper digital teacher education providers, without reducing the quality and rigour of its moderation processes.

##### *My experience*

Initially I planned to take the role of a critical friend (Mat Noor & Shafee, 2020) but it quickly became apparent that I needed to take a much more hands on approach. The department was offered a free year-long pilot to trial some software with its International QTS programme. In theory this sounds great but in practice this was very emotionally laborious, involving an incredible amount of negotiation and conflict resolution behind the scenes. Not to mention learning far more legal jargon than I ever expected to, given my role.

##### *My reflections and learning*

The process was invaluable though as it gave me a greater understanding of how to deal with interpersonal conflict, how to reconcile my emotions with those of the strand team (Lam, et al., 2021) and how to better communicate with other departments within the wider institution. Having to explain to strangers why the department needed to pilot the software provided me with an opportunity to better understand how its students learn in different phases and subjects and a greater understanding of the assessment and feedback processes on the QTS component of the programme.

##### *Applying my learning*

Having successfully completed the software pilot in year one of the DTEP, I led the subsequent procurement process to obtain a permanent digital solution to manage the work-based learning elements of the QTS programmes (RICS, 2014). The solution went live in September 2024. The procurement process progressed more rapidly and smoothly because of the lessons learned during the pilot phase, particularly in relation to brokering relationships, reconciling competing priorities, and negotiating across institutional boundaries.

On reflection, much of this work aligned with what Whitchurch (2008) characterises as third space practice. Activity that sits between, and draws upon, both academic and professional domains. Leading the procurement required me to inhabit precisely this hybrid space - mediating between IT services, legal and compliance teams, senior leadership, external vendors, and academic colleagues. Third-space professionals often operate as translators across such environments, building legitimacy through relational work rather than positional authority. My experience in moving between these intersecting cultures and organisational logics helped me to anticipate potential points of tension, communicate more effectively with colleagues and partners, and foreground the pedagogical rationale behind the procurement. Viewing the process through a third space lens (Brookfield, 1995) helps explain why the procurement was ultimately more efficient. The work demanded a boundary-crossing disposition and a capacity to navigate ambiguity, both of which are identified as central features of third-space roles (Whitchurch, 2008, 2012).

## Conclusion

My experience of leading a complex project was enjoyable but challenging. I believe that it is important to approach each leadership situation individually and consider each one as both an opportunity and a learning experience. Managing complex projects is not just about leadership, it is also about innovation and change management. The three components are inextricably linked and to succeed it is important to recognise this (Scott, 2020).

Complex projects rarely sit neatly within predefined organisational structures. They require the capacity to move fluidly across boundaries, to translate between different professional languages, and to hold together diverse and sometimes competing sets of expectations. This interplay is key to the work of third-space professionals. Whitchurch's (2008) categorisation is helpful here. She defines professionals who situate their role "within the boundaries of a function or organisational location that they had either constructed for themselves, or which had been imposed upon them" as bounded professionals, while unbounded professionals show little regard for traditional role boundaries.

Whilst the project lead role at the start of the DTEP could be described as bounded, I would argue that bringing the first year of the DTEP to a successful conclusion required me to work well beyond the traditional limits of my role and to embrace responsibilities normally associated with multiple professional domains - academic, administrative, digital, and operational. In doing so, I increasingly occupied what Whitchurch (2008) terms an unbounded third-space position. This is because leadership in complex projects often demands more than the execution of a formal remit. It entails relational brokerage, interpretive work, and the capacity to mobilise colleagues around shared goals, all of which resonate strongly with third-space practice as well as innovation and (particularly) change management. Indeed, current change-management research reinforces the idea that complex initiatives require leadership practices that extend far beyond formal job boundaries (Mei et al., 2024).

As Whitchurch (2008, pp. 393-394) further observes, unbounded third-space professionals build authority not through position or hierarchy but "on a personal basis, via lateral relationships with colleagues inside and outside the university." This aligns closely with my experience. Much of the progress made on the DTEP relied on cultivating trust, negotiating with colleagues in other departments, and developing informal networks that supported formal processes. This has led me to reflect more deeply on the nature of project leadership. Although my responsibilities and identity have expanded, my underlying philosophy has remained consistent. Effective work depends on strong personal connections, transparent communication, and a willingness to operate collaboratively. What has changed, however, is my recognition that complex projects inherently require a third-space orientation. Their success depends on individuals who can inhabit hybrid spaces, navigate ambiguity, and integrate academic, professional, and organisational priorities. In this respect, leading the DTEP has not only extended my practice but has also provided a clearer understanding of the value and necessity of unbounded third-space roles in contemporary HE. For me, the bounded/unbounded distinction is not a label but a trajectory. Start bounded to focus the work and become unbounded to make it succeed in the real world.

### *Lessons learned*

The first year of the DTEP highlighted several overarching lessons about leading complex, boundary-spanning work in HE. A key learning was the importance of recognising and embracing the hybrid

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nature of third space leadership. Operating across academic, professional, and technical domains required continual shifts in identity, influence, and positionality. Rather than attempting to maintain neutrality, I learned that acknowledging these multiple identities enabled more authentic and effective engagement with colleagues and project partners.

Another lesson concerned the emotional and relational dimensions of leading complex initiatives. Each strand surfaced different forms of interpersonal negotiation (whether managing tensions between competing institutional agendas, navigating unfamiliarity in digital communities of practice, or addressing the emotional labour inherent in conflict resolution). These experiences reaffirmed that relationship-building is not ancillary to complex project work, it is its foundation. Time invested in establishing trust, fostering dialogue, and understanding colleagues' motivations directly shaped the effectiveness of each strand.

A further lesson emerged from the iterative, emergent nature of the project. The use of Agile methods was helpful, but I learned that iterative processes require not only structural flexibility but also conceptual flexibility including the willingness to revisit assumptions, realign scope, and widen the lens when early solutions do not work as anticipated. This was particularly evident in the DCOP strand, where initial topic selection constrained participation until we broadened our scope.

Additionally, internal and external dissemination proved far more integral to project success than I initially anticipated. Sharing work externally strengthened my understanding of how to communicate complex ideas to diverse audiences, while internal dissemination fostered greater staff engagement and helped legitimise project outcomes. Finally, I learned that clarity of purpose, as seen in the RLOs strand, significantly improves momentum. Where staff understand the 'why' behind the work, participation is more willing, and leadership becomes facilitative rather than directive.

Collectively, these lessons emphasise that complex digital transformation requires more than project management. It requires adaptive, relational, and reflective leadership situated firmly within the third space (Whitchurch, 2012).

*Recommendations*

Drawing on these reflections, several recommendations emerge for colleagues leading similarly complex, digital education projects:

- Leaders operating across boundaries should actively acknowledge the hybrid nature of their role. Rather than attempting to conform to traditional academic or administrative categories, embracing third space positionality enables more effective mediation between diverse groups and supports the negotiation of competing priorities.
- Before focusing on deliverables, invest time in building relationships, trust, and shared purpose. This includes creating informal opportunities for colleagues to connect, especially when working across subjects, departments, or professional cultures. Early relational work strengthens collaboration and reduces tension later in the project.
- Themes with a clearly articulated purpose (particularly where deliverables align with existing workload or strategic priorities) are more likely to succeed. Leaders should work with teams to

co-construct explicit rationales, demonstrating how each strand contributes to strategic aims, student experience, or institutional priorities.

- Complex projects require the ability to adapt scope, methods, or direction as new information emerges. Agile approaches can support this, but leaders must also cultivate a culture where iterative learning is normalised, and team members feel comfortable revisiting early decisions.
- Decisions about technology, assessment, or curriculum design should be framed within existing quality assurance structures early in the process. Front loading this thinking helps avoid retrofitting solutions later and ensures innovations are pedagogically and operationally robust.
- Engaging external specialists can accelerate progress, particularly in areas requiring specialist knowledge (e.g., DCOP facilitation). Similarly, disseminating work externally builds legitimacy, attracts interest, and strengthens the project's wider impact. Leaders should plan dissemination routes as a core project activity rather than an afterthought.
- Complex projects often involve negotiating competing priorities and managing tensions. Leaders should cultivate emotional intelligence practices, establish transparent communication channels, and seek opportunities to de-escalate conflict early. Creating a culture where concerns can be raised without fear supports healthier team dynamics.
- Kolb's cycle proved invaluable in translating experience into actionable change. Embedding reflective structures (e.g., structured review meetings or critical friend roles) can help teams to learn iteratively and maintain momentum across long timescales.

## Biography

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