

# Exploding hierarchies for educational change: leveraging ‘third spaces’ within Solent University’s Transformation Academy

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## Abstract

This chapter explores how and to what extent a major cross-institutional change project, delivering sustainable learning and teaching through Solent University’s online pivot, triggered the explosion of traditional hierarchies, coalescing teams of previously dispersed roles for implementation. The Transformation Academy, led by Solent Learning and Teaching Institute, aimed to ready academic staff for the online delivery of 150 courses within 12 weeks, by September 2020. Project success meant overlooking established role titles, traditional remits and formal line management structures, favouring instead a full, fluid, and atypical collaboration between Academic Development and Learning Technologies staff often compartmentalised in organisational structures. Preliminary findings suggest that L&T initiatives should embrace such flexibility to benefit from wider abilities and knowledge to effectively deliver a project beyond job description confines.

## Keywords

Collaboration; Institutional change; Organizational structure; Third space; Communication

## Introduction

Responding to COVID-19, UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) underwent an online shift (Adams 2020). While initial activity supported emergency responses (e.g. Sandars et al, 2020), as the first lockdown from March 2020 endured, more sustainable and effective online learning programmes emerged (Feldman, 2020; McKie, 2020). To operationalise this online learning and teaching (L&T) delivery move, many UK HEIs have embarked on a rapid deployment of change projects (Crawford et al, 2020).

This case study aims to explore how and to what extent the Transformation Academy, a major cross-institutional change project delivering sustainable L&T during the period of Solent University’s online pivot, triggered the explosion of traditional hierarchies within the L&T centre, coalescing teams of previously dispersed roles for implementation.

To do this, the chapter proceeds in three main sections. The first explores the literature of communication and decision-making in a context of exploded hierarchies and how it allows for greater innovation and more open, collaborative working. The second section introduces the study’s case study and research design while the third discusses the results and the key findings emerging from the data analysis. The chapter concludes by supplying insights about the long-term cultural change possible when collaboration moves beyond short-term, project-based scenarios.

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## Contextual Background

The notion of breaking down hierarchies is most usually associated with the organisational studies and human resource management literature (cf. Pinchot & Pinchot, 1996) where it is a phenomenon driving organisational efficiency and effectiveness. This is based on the premise that rigid hierarchies can stifle flexibility and innovation and be at the root of corporate decay. The notion goes hand in hand with concepts of distributed decision making (cf. Schneeweiss, 2012) where authority is distributed throughout larger organisations to mitigate against major issues arising in traditional hierarchies. For example, communication across organisations tends to be less effective, inter-departmental rivalries manifest themselves as ‘turf wars’ and decision-making benefits departmental interests rather than whole organisations.

The breaking down of hierarchies is a notion that the Higher Education (HE) sector has coined, especially in the UK, where HE increasingly operates akin to corporate business models linked to the growing marketisation of HE (Molesworth et al, 2010). Within HE, the explosion of traditional hierarchies also includes various emerging and developing practices including so-called co-creation with students (Bovill, 2014), which puts students at a level of parity with Faculty in such activities as curriculum design and the development of institutional policies and practices aimed at enhancing the student experience.

L&T centres within HEIs are often locations of defined hierarchies or at best siloing (Harland & Staniforth, 2008); a mindset occurring when certain departments or sectors resist information sharing with others in the same organisation. This siloing is often apparent between educational developers (those responsible for developing the teachers) and front-line academic staff (those responsible for doing the teaching). According to Magruder (2019, p.55), for example, ‘Educational development literature is replete with explorations of the field’s marginalization despite its role improving teaching and learning.’

The longstanding rift between educational development or those in roles as academic developers and educational technology or those in roles of learning technologists within HE L&T centres (Trust et al, 2017) is another specific and well-rehearsed example of siloing within the educational development community and the focus here.

Despite these differences and divisions, the problem of silos is not inevitable, and some parts of the academy actively resist incorporation into narrow spheres of activity and influence. ‘Third space’ was coined by Celia Whitchurch (2008) to describe those in HE straddling the divide between the academic and non-academic, teaching and non-teaching. Likely to be found in collaborative, multi-professional teams, working on broad-based, university-wide projects, third space professionals tend to operate via light touch, self-managing teams focusing on the dialogue and negotiation of empowering leadership, rather than the requirements and control of hierarchical management (Whitchurch, 2015). Their ambiguous position allows them to leverage relationships and networks, challenge structures and roles, and gain legitimacy in areas outside of their official zone of activity (White et al, 2020). Their multiplicities of viewpoints, meanings and practices allow for what Quinn (2010, cited in Parkes, 2018, p.4) describes as the ‘un-self’, or ‘a becoming’; a type of reflexive adaptation and development that draws on context and interaction, unconstrained by role title or job description. The benefit of third space professionals therefore lies in their ability to bring different stakeholders together. With its capacity to bring together educational developers, instructional designers, learning technologists and

teaching staff, online learning has been identified by Whitchurch (2008; 2015) as a site for third space activity.

Our data show that Solent's Transformation Academy (TA) project has acted as a third space, supporting the creation of mobile and flexible teams that cut across boundaries and which are based more on relationships rather than roles and hierarchies.

### Research & Evaluation Procedure

Internally titled Transformation Academy and led by Solent Learning and Teaching Institute (SLTI), the project has since grown into a larger staged project set to last until 2023. The focus of this chapter is on TA phase 1 which ran from May to September 2020 with the sole aim of preparing academic staff to deliver 150 courses, including 1100 modules, partially or mainly online in the first semester of the 2020/21 academic year.

Project success meant overlooking established role titles, traditional remits and formal line management structures, shifting the focus to SLTI staff's core skills and competencies. As such, the TA drove a full, fluid, and atypical collaboration between Academic Development and Learning Technologies staff often compartmentalised in L&T organisational structures.

In a staged developmental process where course teams worked together on their course vision and identity, guided by the Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation cycle (ADDIE model) of instructional design (Morrison et al, 2010), the project team modelled the necessary community building and interaction.

Adopting a qualitative empirical research design and single, local, and exploratory case study approach, data are derived from a series of ethically approved, semi-structured exploratory interviews with project members operating outside their usual hierarchies in the TA project implementation to explore the phenomena of exploded hierarchies.

The interview sample was compiled from a total population of 76 TA project members, drawn from the four teams structured under the Pro Vice Chancellor. The operational lead for the project was the Head of Learning and Teaching (HoLT), who negotiated an allocation of staff from the other three Heads. New TA project staff members were allocated across six teams within the TA working under their designated team lead but did not formally change line management reporting.

<<TABLE 1: Hierarchical structure, composition of TA teams and their function and role in TA project>>

Out of those 76 a purposive sample was based on two key criteria. First, interviewees had to be working outside of their usual team structure and within one of the TA sub-teams led by a person not their usual line manager. Second, they had to be working on priorities not ordinarily assigned to them.

Based on these criteria, we identified 56 potential interviewees; too many to interview during the project's key period of operationalisation. Therefore, we used a convenience sampling approach to select a 20% sample of those most likely to have availability to talk to us. In sum, we interviewed 11 members of staff constituting almost 20% of the eligible population. To negate conflicts of interest, no interviews were conducted within formal line management structures. All participants were invited to confirm their informed consent and understood their right to withdraw at any time.

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The semi-structured interviews were built around 12 main questions that focused on the interviewees' roles and relationships during the TA project, with space for interviewees to reflect on their experiences. Interview duration was on average 25 minutes. Given the continuing pattern of remote working at the case study university, interviews were conducted via Teams and recorded for the purposes of transcription before being deleted. All the interviews were conducted by the authors within a 2-week window towards the end of the project.

The data were analysed in NVivo using a thematic content analysis approach. We looked for patterns across the data set, transferring these themes into codes and assigning them to the data set. From this we were able to present the results and findings according to these key themes and as discussed in the following section.

## Results and Findings

The following section explores four key themes derived from the qualitative data in response to the question of how and to what extent the TA triggered the explosion of traditional hierarchies within the L&T centre by coalescing teams of previously dispersed roles for implementation. These are: 1) the collaborative work triggered by the TA; 2) the TA's capacity to broaden what were previously clearly defined and siloed roles and widen professional perspectives; 3) as a result of collaboration and broadening perspectives the TA facilitated the breaking up of usual reporting lines; and 4) the TA's capacity to engender institutional and cultural change. The remainder of this section explores each of these themes in turn.

### Collaborative working

The first theme that emerges from the data relates to the TA's significant impact in triggering collaborative working between and across teams not usually working together.

Like many HEIs, from March to May 2020 and in response to the pandemic, colleagues worked at speed to transition teaching and assessment from face-to-face to online during the final weeks of term. While student feedback was positive, such ad hoc changes at modular level were unsustainable in the longer-term and incompatible with our commitment to a robust and sound student experience for all. As the initial crisis endured, staff recognised that course-wide and university-wide services and experiences would be limited in September 2020 and would need to be woven into an online experience. Finally, we knew that confidence in online teaching was uneven and so the transition would only be successful if academic colleagues were supported to develop their skills and share their experiences. As a result, the aim of the TA was to provide a supportive and structured approach to ensure that all course teams were able to transition their virtual learning environment (VLE) course and module pages to create an immersive and rich online learning experience for students from September 2020.

Following a series of previous restructures, by May 2020 the SLTI team was incredibly lean and therefore unable to undertake the scale of work required to deliver this aim. Driven by crisis mode, project scope, the time critical nature and required pace of work, the institution granted SLTI permission to work outside its own formal boundaries, giving operational lead of the TA project to the HoLT, a role which naturally lends itself to working across professional services and academic course teams. The institutional structure also lent itself to promoting cross-team working, with the PVC Students and Teaching role providing oversight for four service areas within its portfolio. Consequently, the PVC tasked these four service areas with working together under the HoLT to deliver the TA phase 1 work.

Our findings show four key attitudes towards collaborative working in the TA. First, one TA project member positively experienced the TA work as 'highly collaborative' specifically in relation to 'having a wider team to share ideas with and work' (Int.1, 2020). Another team member stated that the TA project's value is in its ability to act as a 'driver for engagement' between professional service areas and the academic community (Int. 4, 2020); a relationship which is often divided. Second, according to some TA project members its success depended on having the opportunity to work with other people. One interview respondent explained:

It's the coming together of all the departments as well...like instructional design, Library, SLTI. If all of those services aren't working together in a cohesive way, it would be an absolute nightmare (Int.8, 2020).

Another interviewee recognised that although in the TA,

Everyone's got their different roles...it's definitely been connected and joined up, and I think that has made it a success. I think if people had been too concerned with staying in their own little bunkers it wouldn't have worked (Int. 1, 2020).

The consensus of respondents suggests that 'working dynamically across teams...was essential' for project success. Indeed, 'the success of the university depends on people not just saying, oh, I work in my silo and don't go beyond that' (Int. 4, 2020). Third, enhanced TA-based collaboration has motivated previously unconnected teams, in showing 'what we can do and how we can do so' (Int.5, 2020). Another respondent agreed that it 'massively helps' when you've got 'committed...people who work hard' (Int.8, 2020). Finally, the TA brought about a depth and intensity of collaboration which suggests change will endure rather than being superficial and short-lived, with one respondent believing that the TA project has 'laid the foundations for long term collaboration' and 'established...early relationships' with academic teams around the university (Int.2, 2020). The benefits were also plain for a second respondent, who felt their team had 'become a lot more visible, through the TA', which they saw as being 'really very, very beneficial to me and to the team as a whole' (Int.4, 2020).

#### Broadening roles and widening perspectives

The second central theme relates to the TA's capacity to broaden previously clearly defined and siloed roles and widen professional perspectives. Project members saw parts of the university and its functioning in a way that they would not normally have done, thus effectively opening the university up to the wider scrutiny of a broader staff base.

Our data show four main insights in this area. First, the TA's power lay in giving project members permission to step outside their usual work parameters. According to one respondent,

the work itself is genuinely nothing like anything I've done before...it's been really eye opening to see it from...[the academic] perspective and actually to be given the opportunity to provide insight (Int.6, 2020).

Tempered with the necessity to provide training in new areas of work, benefits were derived from expanded team members using their varied backgrounds and 'expertise with working with students' and 'to transfer that skill set to this project' (Int. 9, 2020), which was 'interesting' and 'excit[ing]' (Int. 6, 2020). Second, the TA was a catalyst for giving project members access to people and material they would not have habitually encountered, giving individuals enhanced insight into strategic work. The TA

provided opportunities to develop skills around creating accessible and inclusive online content and provided a 'fresh kind of perspective' (Int.6, 2020) by broadening the purview of these professional services staff to include academic terminology and priorities

For one respondent the TA work and the in-house training 'really [made us] think about our delivery to students...so we've...found...a more advanced level...in terms of what we can now do' (Int.5, 2020). Another interviewee notes that the TA

opened up a lot of doors for my team to have those conversations with academic staff that really have long been key to the role of my team...historically, sometimes they had a harder job opening the door in some departments than others (Int.4, 2020).

Another stated, 'I think when everything's thrown into a crisis...you get a better picture of under the hood of...how things happen' (Int.2, 2020).

Third, the new work broadened project members' professional perspective and allowed them to step outside the boundaries of their normal formal role, inspiring future direction as well as supplying fresh insight into the impact of their actions. Consequently, undertaking new work allowed TA team members, finally, to enhance their personal and professional profile which in turn increased project loyalty and improved chances of project success, as well as increased loyalty to the institution through the opportunity to contribute to its overall direction. Moreover, some team members were pleased to see the renewed prominence of their often unrecognised work:

instructional design is suddenly something that people are aware of....We're acknowledged...in both the teaching and learning side, as well...the technology side. So....professionally that's been a big, big boost to what we do' (Int.2).

The outcome across participants was a rise in status, commensurate with recognition of how their work has contributed so positively to an engaging, inclusive and accessible student experience.

#### The breaking up of usual reporting lines

The third central theme emerging from the data relates to the impact of the previous two. Resulting from its capacity to promote collaboration and broaden perspectives, the TA facilitated the breaking up of usual reporting lines. Indeed, collaboration in the cross-institutional TA project broadened personal and professional perspectives. As a result, the TA disrupted some strongly held ways of working – with engrained siloed working very prevalent in the institutional psyche. The interview responses highlighted three specific aspects to this. First, TA team members were generally highly aware that they were operating outside their usual formal hierarchies and team roles. One interviewee stated 'it's not an alien concept to be taking direction from somebody who isn't your line manager. That's something that we're all quite familiar with from previous projects (Int.4, 2020) and for another 'it was quite obvious that this was outside of the team and department even' (Int. 6, 2020). Second, our data show that generally people were happy with this approach and to work in this way. According to one interviewee, 'the whole management structure thing is not something I've ever been involved with. I'm...more ground level...I don't really mind what's going on above me' (Int.7, 2020). Another interviewee reports:

Obviously I was made aware of it, but I don't think it necessarily impacted what I did because it was just more of what we do...I'm not worried too much about the whole structure part of it, it's...getting the job done (Int.3, 2020).

Thirdly, respondents perceived this new way of working as long-overdue, refreshing and an invigorating change of direction opening up new professional opportunities in contrast to silo-working. According to one,

the scale of [the TA]...was obviously...huge [and] necessary, but it didn't feel daunting and so I think I was...quite excited to be involved in something that I had essentially been trying to achieve the last four years without any real success so I could see that it would mean quite big changes for the University...and...a huge change...for teaching staff (Int.1, 2020).

Another interviewee reports, 'the idea of SOL, and looking in depth at what the academics are building on their course pages...was not part of our life. It's completely flung it open (Int.9, 2020)' and another states

I think...positives have come out of this situation...we've had to just radically change everything so quickly. It's almost taken away the opportunity to say, oh, we can't do that (Int.8, 2020).

#### The capacity to engender change

The final overarching theme emerging from our data relates to the TA's capacity to engender change, derived from project members' enjoyment of the work carried out. Our data show that culture change embedded within a major cross-institutional project like the TA works more effectively when staff see their contribution to fundamental and strategically aligned University work. This naturally gave staff an enhanced sense of purpose in an uncertain context and a feeling of doing the right thing by students thus de-centering personal concerns. Three particularly illuminating themes emerged during the interviews in relation to this phenomenon. First, while COVID-19 generated individual staff feelings of isolation, anxiety, and disconnectedness with the workplace and colleagues, the TA provided a focal point for activity and energies and a hook to hang their institutional belonging on. One interviewee reported that

in a funny sort of way, I think it's been the best thing that could have happened during this weird period of time because...it's really focused...[and] occupied my mind. Maybe if I'd been doing things that hadn't been so challenging, I would have had more time to think or dwell on things, or I might have felt less motivated because it's been quite different working in your own home environment as well and not being in your work situation (Int.7, 2020).

Second, the TA project empowered staff to feel part of something bigger than their individual difficulties taking them away from personal contexts and unease with the wider medical, economic and social situation to consider the student experience in September. As one interviewee stated, 'I think having something like this and this engaging to work on while we've been at home has also been really useful and having more people to draw on' (Int.1, 2020).

Finally, the TA project was highly student-focused and outwardly facing. Given Solent's long tradition as a student-centred university, the TA work played into peoples' natural tendencies to do everything possible to support students. Indeed, one interviewee asserted,

I think that's been the most rewarding part of this project, knowing that...we're supporting our students and we're giving them the best possible service that we can within these really challenging times (Int.5, 2020).

### Long-term Impacts

In our exploration of how and to what extent the TA triggered the explosion of traditional hierarchies within Solent's L&T centre, we found the project catalysed four critical changes: 1) enhanced collaborative working between and across teams; 2) the broadening of previously clearly defined and siloed roles along with the widening of professional perspectives, 3) the breaking up of usual reporting lines and previously established formalised hierarchies and 4) the engendering of institutional and cultural change.

These findings align to the key features of an exploding hierarchies context. First, the TA was an obvious catalyst for enhanced communication. Indeed, project participants confirmed that the TA promoted positive and effective ways of working such as improved communication between teams and across the organisation (Pinchot and Pinchot, 1996), greater appreciation and understanding of how individual teams fit into wider University work and therefore generated greater staff motivation to see projects through to a successful end for the organisation's common good.

Second, the TA formalised an already emergent pattern of distributed decision-making (Schneeweiss, 2012) at Solent in that decisions taken in relation to the project benefited the organisation as a whole rather than specific departmental interests.

Finally, the TA qualifies as a third space (Whitchurch, 2008) where academic and professional services coalesced in collaborative and multi-professional teams on a broad-based project. The TA also supported the creation of mobile and flexible teams that cut across boundaries; based more on relationships rather than roles and hierarchies. This was nowhere more evident than in the SLTI team itself. Usually formally and structurally divided between learning technologies and learning and teaching under two separate heads, with operational lead for the TA assigned to the HoLT, SLTI's dual functions were brought together for efficiency and to maximise implementation at pace.

Triggered by the TA, these new ways of working at Solent have a potentially valuable ripple effect beyond the project's lifespan. Rather than tailing off with the end of the project, their continuance is likely to contribute to increasing institutional cohesiveness and staff efficacy going forward. If the explosion of traditional hierarchies seen throughout the first TA project phase becomes institutionally engrained, long lived and sustainable, rather than project-based and short-term, this perpetuation could in turn provide the foundation for long term cultural change with equal value attributed within HEIs to both academics and those who develop academics. In an effort to eradicate siloing, such cultural change could ideally become formalised through a re-structure of SLTI whereby learning and teaching becomes the nexus around which all aligned nodes cluster including for example learning technologies, course quality assurance, employability and assessments.

### Author biographies

#### Professor Karen Heard-Lauréote

Karen is Professor and Head of Learning and Teaching at Solent University, responsible for overseeing the Solent Learning and Teaching Institute's mission to enhance the quality of teaching practice and learning support across the institution. With over 15 years' experience in higher education, Karen is a National Teaching Fellow (NTF), Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (PFHEA) and Fellow of



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Carina is the Instructional Design Manager at Solent University, responsible for overseeing the development of the Virtual Learning Environment as an innovative and engaging learning environment for all learners. She has over 14 years' experience in higher education, is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and sits on the Steering Group of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education. Carina's expertise lies in the strategic integration of technology with pedagogy to enhance practice in a complex environment.

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