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Creative arts technicians in academia: To transition or not to transition?

ABSTRACT

This article reports on a small-scale study undertaken at a leading UK arts university. The study aims to explore the increasing trend of 'technicians' transitioning their careers into 'academia'. Studies that focus on technicians are scarce. Those few existing studies describe the growth of practiced-based teaching in the creative arts, the sector's increasing reliance on technicians and technicians' greater involvement in shaping the learning experiences of students. Conversely, there is a rich literature that describes the unbundling and devaluation of traditional academic roles. This article employs a phenomenographic methodology to explore the experiences of three members of staff who have recently transitioned from technician roles into academia, considering whether the factors that have elevated the status of technicians have also eroded traditional academic roles, and whether this enables individuals to transition between what many experience as disparate camps.

KEYWORDS

phenomenography
technicians
technical teaching
non-academic
para-academic
third space

INTRODUCTION

In 2004 The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned an in-depth investigation of the supply, retention, roles, development and career progression of highly skilled technicians working in UK higher education (HE). HEFCE concluded that 'it is unlikely that a technician

would be able to progress to being a pure academic' (Smith et al. 2004: 30). Within my own institution, however, it has become increasingly common for technicians to move into academic roles. To explore how individuals transition between what many experience as disparate camps, I consider in this article the experiences of three members of staff who have recently transitioned from technician roles into academia.

Despite emerging small-scale ethnographic studies (Vere 2012; Sams 2016), research relating to technician careers in HE is scarce, although the changing role of technicians has not escaped the attention of the Government and educational press. The 1997 Dearing Report identified that 'There is a wide range of non-academic staff employed in HE and, for some of them, the distinctions from academic staff are becoming increasingly blurred' (Education in England 1997: 32). In more recent literature, the traditional academic/non-academic divide has become less distinct (Whitchurch 2008, 2012). Economic and policy drivers are a contributory factor (Macfarlane 2011) and this is particularly evident within practice-based, creative arts and technology-led subjects (Shreeve 2009, 2010, 2011).

In my own experience of the creative arts HE sector, I have witnessed a reduction in the number of academics, while simultaneously observing a change in pedagogic emphasis from the traditional 'chalk and talk' of the lecture theatre in favour of interactive and small group teaching in studios and workshops. Within my own institution these factors combined have contributed towards an increase in creative arts technicians working as teachers – in certain cases becoming lead educators within their discipline.

Historically, certain quarters of studio education have asserted a distinction between technical and academic camps. However, there are indications in the literature and in my own experience that this formal demarcation is abating. Technicians are increasingly finding themselves encumbered with the skills, experience and qualifications that enable them to transition into academic roles if they choose. This article considers whether the traditional distinction between camps remains apposite within contemporary arts education.

The shifting boundaries between academic and technical camps are under-researched. Arguably most relevant is Whitchurch's concept of a 'third space' (2008) located between camps in which a new type of boundary-crossing hybrid HE worker resides. Figure 1 visualizes Whitchurch's third space as a Venn diagram.

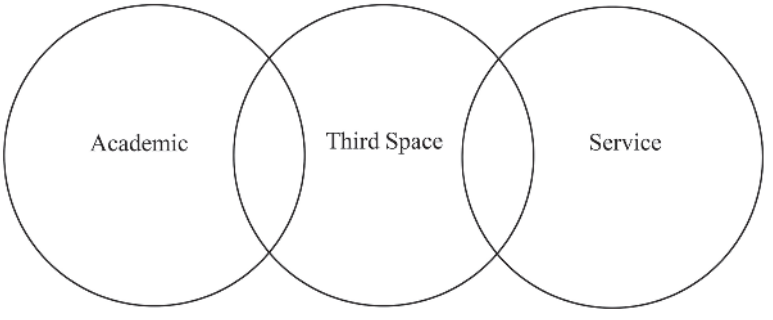

Figure 1: Whitchurch's third space.

Whitchurch refers to 'service' rather than 'non-academic'. I am choosing to locate technicians within this theoretical space. I use the term 'technician' within this article to describe specialist staff working on non-academic contracts with primary responsibilities for maintenance, health and safety, and supporting academic activities, while also providing demonstrations, teaching and support for students with practice-based learning. I set out to gain insights into the experiences of three former technicians currently working as academics, considering what aspects of the HE sector, the institution (a leading UK arts university) and the individuals themselves played within their own professional migration.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the long-standing disparity of role esteem between academic and technical camps. Through my own observation I have seen how technicians have been traditionally viewed as the impoverished subordinates of their academic colleagues. The literature supports these observations: 'Technicians rarely make HE news, are notably absent in sector wide award ceremonies, are not featured in the National Student Survey – the list goes on' (Vere 2013: 2). Technicians 'are in a lower social class than our 'elite' academic colleagues' (Guardian Higher Education Network 2016: n.pag.). These views enforce a stereotype of generic brown coats, non-remarkable drones carrying out repairs, ordering consumables and tidying up. In terms of their collective profile, technicians have long been viewed as subservient anonymous enablers to academia, referred to as 'Cinderella' staff (Vere and Murphy 2012: 8), 'vital but neglected' (Lewis and Gospel 2015: 32), an 'invisible workforce' (Whitchurch 2012: 1).

There are indications that this is changing. Many working within arts education will have observed the rising profile of technicians in recent years. This may be partly attributed to changes in recruitment policies and the fresh blood that this brings in to the profession. New technician roles usually require Level 4 qualifications or above, with masters and teaching qualifications frequently listed as desirable. Consequently, 'professional staff have better qualifications than ever' (Whitchurch 2012: 1). Qualifications are important, but practical skills of both relevance and currency are vital, particularly within the arts. Smith et al. noted that technicians have 'chosen a career path that requires them to remain technically competent in their specific fields. To maintain such competency requires continuous opportunities for updating and learning' (2004: 17). Consequently, technicians are more likely to engage with university staff management/development agendas, unlike academics who 'tend to be a culture of knowers rather than learners and for whom the benefits [of appraisal] are prioritized low' (McCaffery 2010: 202). Coaldrake proposes 'many academics see their primary loyalty as being to their discipline, rather than to the institution in which they work. General staff, on the other hand, by and large have little doubt about the direction of their loyalties' (2001: 23). 'Non-academic staff by contrast see these processes as developing them rather than controlling them' (McCaffery 2010: 169).

Sams reports that technicians are more inclined to engage with professional development activities because it serves dual benefits. In addition to becoming more highly skilled workers, creative arts technicians 'commonly pursue their artistic practice outside of the university and work externally as practitioners' (2016: 4). Contractually most universities require academic and technical staff to upskill in relation to institutional needs, both in terms of disciplinary practice and more recently through gaining teaching qualifications. Teaching has become a key element of many technician roles and few

would argue that technical instruction has become a critical part of the student learning experience.

Smith et al. used the term 'quasi-teaching' to describe the process and material-based teaching carried out by technicians, noting the greatest prominence in the field of art and design (2004: 41). In modern arts education the term 'quasi-teaching' is unfair and representative of the outdated view that technicians do not teach. Institutions choose their words carefully in this respect, suggesting that technicians provide 'demonstrations, inductions, instruction, tutoring', etc. Yet at my institution all technicians teach in some way; some teach the use of equipment or processes and others teach safe working practices. I find a more useful working distinction is that technicians teach practice and process whereas academics are more likely to deliver lectures, theory and concepts, while also contextualizing the work and guiding the trajectory of learning. Despite the rhetoric, technicians are teaching within HE; universities know it, academics know it, students know it and the literature knows it. Perpetuating an alternative shibboleth is 'outdated snobbery' (Guardian Higher Education Network 2016: n.pag.).

HEFCE acknowledge that 'the technician role is increasingly growing to include the demonstration of concepts and theory, and is ultimately moving towards an active teaching role, away from "pure technicians" roles' (2010: 27). Looking ahead, Lewis and Gospel predicted that technicians would continue to 'become more and more deeply involved in teaching' (2015: 10). In response, many universities have established roles that embrace and formally blur the academic/technician distinction. Vacancies titled 'Technical Instructor, Technical Demonstrator, Technical Tutor, Teaching Technician', etc. are now routinely advertised. Within Whitchurch's 'third space' role holders who span both professional and academic domains are termed 'blended professionals' (2012: 9). Macfarlane laments this trend, arguing that 'para-academics' constitute 'a 'hollowing out' of what it means to be an academic (2011: 69). Macfarlane reports that within the preceding decade academics have declined in terms of the level and breadth of their responsibilities (2011) but also in their number, which has been steadily decreasing. 'Academics are now in the minority at 71% of UK Higher Education Institutions' (Fowler 2016: 1). Finkelstein and Schuster concluded that traditional academics are being replaced by 'para-academics' in a 'silent' revolution (2001: 1). Para-academics carry out just one specialist role, which, says Macfarlane, devalues academia: 'the reality is that academics have become role specialists who teach or research or manage rather than performing all three functions' (2015: 107).

I argue that conditions within creative arts HE in recent years have been conducive to elevating the status of technicians while also 'unbundling' traditional academic roles. At the sector level this may be partly explained in economic terms (academic salaries are considerably more expensive than technical equivalents). Macfarlane argues that 'the deskilling of academic staff in HE follows a pattern designed to lower the costs of a university education and obtain better 'productivity' from those working to deliver it' (2011: 63). For higher education institutions (HEIs) hybrid technician/teacher roles represent excellent value, providing high-quality practice-based teaching at a comparatively low cost. For the technicians themselves, choosing a blended role can provide career advancement and opportunities to develop pedagogic skills through practice and study. Postgraduate certificate (PGC) courses are often compulsory for new academics, but remain voluntary for most technicians. Institutional development agendas (such as obtaining teaching qualifications)

are often interpreted very differently from technical and academic perspectives. Ball's 'Terrors of Performativity' (2003) outlines challenges to traditional academic ideals related to increasing managerialism and marketization. However, a decade later Ball accepted that 'performativity is not in any simple sense a technology of oppressions; it is one of satisfactions and rewards, at least for some. Particularly for groups of staff and individuals whose ideals are broadly in alignment with that of the market' (2013: 140).

Those who have worked in this sector will be aware that as technical and academic identities have evolved, technicians have become increasingly aware that their roles and skillsets are not as different from the academic teams that they support as they once were (they remain keenly aware that their salaries and benefits are less comparable). Ball, through a lens of performativity, observed 'inequality [with academic colleagues in this instance] can be the basis for envy, striving, and competition' (2013: 134). The collective awakening of technicians invites parallel with Freire's concept of 'conscientização', which translates (from Portuguese) as 'critical consciousness'. Freire is cited by Thornton (2011: 32) in relation to the convergence of the authority dynamic between teachers and students. The same principle can be applied to the professional sectarianism between the dominant elites (traditional academic roles) against the oppressed (technicians). As the chasm between the oppressed and the dominant elite reduces both groups are transformed in response to each other via a process of 'cultural synthesis' (Freire 1996: 160). As technicians increasingly work 'with' rather than 'for' academic colleagues, their professional identities can drift from technical camps to relocate around the peripheries of academic communities of practice. Wenger states that 'in order to be on an inbound trajectory, newcomers must be granted enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members' (2008: 101). Shreeve describes the same issue from the perspective of practitioner academics, citing Wenger: 'no matter how the peripherality of initial participation is achieved, it must engage newcomers and provide a sense of how the community operates' (2008: 100). Shreeve concludes that for non-members 'envisaging a future within the community of academics is probably an important component of identity work enabling transition between different social worlds' (2011: 88).

From my own experience of working as a technician throughout the 2000s, opportunities to transition to academia were oblique, exceptionally rare and consequently harder to envisage. I found myself frustrated as a technician, unable to transition and chose to advance my own career via a more conventional route into management, consistent with the findings of Smith et al.: 'there is no formal provision for those with advanced technical skills to develop their careers other than by taking on additional management or supervisory responsibilities' (2004: 20). As a manager of creative arts technicians myself I have witnessed the emergence of a more highly skilled, fluid technical workforce that find themselves able to move into academia if they choose. I was driven to undertake this research to be able to explore the implications of these choices so that I might advise my own staff accordingly and offer informed recommendations to the policy-makers of my institution who define and control institutional hierarchies. Graham argues that 'delineations of academic/non-academic should be dissolved and that technical, administrative and academic roles could be evaluated on a single matrix structure' (2014: 67). Strike advocates rejecting the linear academic career ladder altogether, replacing it with a

variable 'map of routes' into academia (2010: 5) to support career transitions. Yet, transitioning technicians out of technical careers should also be viewed with some caution. The HE sector acknowledges that retention of skilled technicians is a major risk. The Technician Council concluded that the 'UK must educate another 450,000 technicians across all sectors by 2020 to address a massive skills shortage' (University of Sheffield 2014: 1). For technicians too, transitioning their careers into academia will suit the ambitions of some, but not all.

METHODOLOGY

I used a phenomenographic approach to investigate how three former technicians (now working as academics) experienced their own professional transition. Phenomenography is located within the interpretivist paradigm and investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people have experienced a given phenomenon. Individual case studies were used to generate data and participants were free to tell their own story in their own words and were invited to describe the subtleties of their lived experience. The sampling frame consisted of the three most recent staff at the university who had transitioned from a technician role to academia. Participants specialized in photography, computer games arts and computer animation. I used semi-structured interviews with questions aligned to the four stages of the transition:

1. Becoming a technician
2. Being a technician
3. Becoming an academic
4. Being an academic.

Base codes (from literature)	Emerging codes (from interview data)
Invisibility and low profile of technicians	Broader viewpoint and support for interdisciplinary practice
Importance of technicians in relation to technology subjects and vocationalism	Desire to return to technical role
Emergence of technicians working as third space/para-academics	Enjoyment of teaching
Institutional engagement, working with peers, managers and academic teams	Differences between technical and academic teaching
Increasing pedagogic and disciplinary development and qualifications	Difficulty with assessment
Individual motivation (conscientizacao) and gaining the skills/confidence to apply	Financial reward (as motivation)
Performativity as a transformational driver	Importance of maintaining own practice
Critical incidents that change or inform career aspirations	Opportunities associated with newer and technology-based courses
Technical roles as apprenticeships for careers in academia (peripheral participation)	Experience/activity within research
The importance of retaining technicians in HE	Diversification and increased participation of HE

Figure 2: Themes emerging from literature and interview data.

Themes emerged from the literature and these themes informed my research questions. I used qualitative data analysis software to establish themes from the literature as base codes and to create emerging codes from interview data (Figure 2). However, it was important that predetermined themes were not considered as exhaustive boundaries. This allowed the narrative to meander into new and unexpected areas.

I categorized and coded interview data, enabling the accounts to be compared, reviewed and explored in terms of discourse analysis. Each code (and tagged data) was analysed independently. This enabled nuances and similarities between the narratives to generate insights.

Insights

I describe below insights addressing each of the above-mentioned themes:

1. Invisibility and low profile of technicians

All participants had witnessed technicians being treated like 'second-class' employees. One participant reported academic colleagues having referred to technicians as being 'down there' (in the hierarchy). Another participant described witnessing an academic colleague taking the credit for a technician's work and dismissing that person's involvement as merely 'button pushing'. All were clear that as technicians they did not feel invisible, but they did feel an evident class distinction between technician and academic roles.

2. Importance of technicians in relation to technology subjects and vocationalism

All participants agreed that their professional status was enhanced through the emerging technology element of their disciplines. Only one participant felt that vocationalism had contributed towards their own journey. Another identified a situation when working with new subject disciplines 'that people higher up in the institution have no idea about it because it is so new so there is no senior academic oversight to inform what you do'.

3. Emergence of technicians working as third space/para-academics

All participants had worked on the seams of academia as technicians through collaboration with academic teams, writing and delivering lesson plans with aims, objectives and learning outcomes aligned to unit briefs. One participant noted: 'as a technician tutor I was running the unit anyway and my academic colleague allowed me to cross over the line into academic territories'.

4. Institutional engagement, working with peers, managers and academic teams

Mutually respectful networks were described within the technical teams, and among academic colleagues and management. As technicians, participants felt empowered: 'my collaborative working relationships were great and it was a really productive environment. We bounced off each other too and shared knowledge. In the wider team, there was a sense of shared community'.

Peer support was also important:

> I was surrounded by an elite group of technicians, everyone in it had jobs that you could look at and say 'that person is really good at what they do'. Most of them had post-graduate qualifications and they were really helpful in helping me develop my own teaching and lesson plans.

5. Increasing pedagogic and disciplinary development and qualifications

The clearest benefit cited by all participants was the ability to upskill, develop and gain qualifications as a technician. Also, the university appraisal system (PDR) was cited repeatedly:

> I felt really engaged with the PDR, it helped me be better myself but also to help the students do better. The objectives fed into my work because they were aligned with the development of myself and my role.

Another observed:

> Most of my bosses have seen appraisals as tick-box exercises, but as a technician it was one of the few times when the process was constructive. It was a genuine conversation about trying to enable you to achieve for the institution but also a drive to improve your performance too, and that is something that I really miss in my current role.

Another noted: 'I felt hugely engaged. In fact, that is one of the things that is missing from my current role'. Their experiences as academics were more negative. One participant reported that they had received no training or development in their academic role. Another participant stated:

> It really just isn't the same in academia and that I miss it lot. In the academic side practice can get overlooked […] as a technician I had the time to watch video tutorials, upskill, attend seminars, software events but as an academic there is just so much admin.

6. Individual motivation (conscientizacao) and gaining the skills/confidence to apply

All participants were intrinsically motivated to develop themselves while working as technicians. Predominantly this took the form of improving the quality of teaching/research through improving practice and gaining qualifications. One participant identified that moving into academia was a natural progression from completing a PGC course. All felt that they were performing academic duties as technicians, but without the recognition or status. One participant reported 'Even now although I am a year and a half into my academic role sometimes people say 'this is your first year of teaching'. It isn't, I have been teaching nearly eleven years!'.

7. Performativity as a transformational driver

Performativity (via measurable performance objectives) was generally cited positively in the technical role; one participant linked the benefit to improving

the quality of their own practice 'if you are able to do that [develop yourself] you are aligning with both your own goals and those of the institution'.

8. Critical incidents that change or inform career aspirations

Incidents described were more like mini-transitions over an extended period. For one participant, gaining a teaching qualification and an MA was the 'critical incident' (lasting six years). Others described how their technical teaching had evolved to become more contextual over time:

> Through showing other artists' work and discussing how they had used the effect or process in their work rather than just teaching the 'thing' in isolation, and that is where the cross over came bringing in theory and other aspects of practice and wanting to teach more.

9. Technical roles as apprenticeships for careers in academia (peripheral participation)

All participants believed that qualifications, skills and experience gained in their technician roles had prepared them for careers in academia.

> Working one on one with students and being able to learn how to ask the right questions to find out what help they need is ideal preparation. As an academic working with individual projects you have to ask to find out before you can take them to the next step.

10. The importance of retaining technicians in HE

The reasons to stay in technical roles varied. One explained:

> Most technicians are likely to be practicing artists and if the school or department took notice of their work, and supported or acknowledged it at some level such as by inviting technicians to participate in seminars, research groups, etc. it would really benefit the technicians via their inclusion in wider networks.

The longest-serving participant (eight years) attributed access to development opportunities as a key factor in their comparatively long service.

11. Broader viewpoint and support for interdisciplinary practice

One participant observed:

> As a technician you get far more of a holistic view of the course than academics because you see students at different stages, working on all units, and supporting them making work in their own time. Technicians are uniquely placed to spot if students are being taught conflicting ways of doing the same thing in different units.

Others observed that they were working across courses and engaging with interdisciplinary and inter-departmental projects more as technicians than they are as academics.

12. Desire to return to a technical role

All participants would consider returning to a technician role. One participant noted: 'it felt like the right time to move on. That said, if the job came up again I would consider returning'. Another stated:

> I'd have stayed if it paid more money and if I'm honest I would still consider going back. Particularly if I have kids because it is so much easier to leave work at 5pm and just close the door and make your own work. As an academic you end up taking your work home with you which can be quite stressful. A bit of me kind of thinks back to the times that I was a technician and remembers it fondly, I could certainly go back […]

13. Enjoyment of teaching

All participants agreed that teaching was more enjoyable as technicians.

> Technical teaching is great because you get to help students without feeding back in a formal fashion, as a technician you can provide formative feedback and help them as they progress and assist when things are going wrong in their work but you never have to be the one who says that their work is worth a D.

14. Differences between technical and academic teaching

The core difference described in relation to teaching is the context. One participant noted: 'Technical teaching is more of a step-by-step approach to achieve a goal, in academic teaching it is more about the development of a concept, looking at other practitioners and contextualising the work'.

Academic teaching is more likely to be delivered to larger groups

> as a technician I didn't deliver lectures, but now most of my sessions are delivered in a lecture format with small group breakout sessions afterwards. It is so tiring, when you teach all day it is exhausting, it takes so much out of you.

15. Difficulty with assessment

Assessment was another key difference between the roles; one participant commented: 'I felt unprepared, previously I had given formative feedback as a technician rather than summative'. Another noted: 'As an academic and unit leader you are responsible for assessment and find yourself corresponding with students who will appeal if there are grounds. You are very much more accountable in academia and you are very aware of that'.

16. Financial reward

All participants confirmed that salary was a motivating factor in their transition to academia and all confirmed that if technical roles provided comparable pay they would have been less likely to leave (and more likely to return).

17. Importance of maintaining own practice

All participants stated that as technicians they experienced continual opportunities to upskill within the technical aspects of their discipline and engage in

their own creative practice. All were clear that the development of their own work had been a factor in their progression to academia.

> I would show some of my own work in progress on the projector in the studio and students would ask me questions. It created a real working studio atmosphere, which was a really authentic experience, and actually was part of the role that I enjoyed the most. As a technician it was natural to spend time in the workshops and studios though as an academic I tend to be sat in my office answering emails when I am not teaching.

18. Opportunities associated with newer and technology-based courses

All participants are specialists in 'digital' arts, and while animation and photography are well established, computer gaming is a relatively new discipline. The participant working in games described his own transition:

> working in a discipline when there are simply not enough people to fill the jobs, I was in the right place at the right time and my imposter complex arises when I am sitting alongside my academic colleagues who have PhDs and teaching qualifications.

19. Involvement in research

Research skills were valued by all participants (one had worked as a researcher in industry, another developed research skills through pedagogic qualifications and another through studying for a Ph.D.).

> I would not have got this current role if I hadn't developed research skills. Research is a key part of my academic role so they [recruiters] liked that. They were also grateful for my technical and practical skills too but it was the research and theory that swung it.

20. Diversification and increased participation of HE

Two participants believed that diversification was changing the level of university teaching and that they had found this to be conducive to their own transition.

> In an ideal world Universities should enable students to make better work and achieve higher grades but there is pressure to open the university to people who are not able to achieve the required entry standard, therefore efforts are targeted towards developing the base competencies. You cannot rely upon students having technical skills when they enrol therefore tutors teach the basics that would have previously been taught at A-level or Foundation. Now, those practical skills need to be taught in the first year of their degree. So, who do you think ends up teaching it?

ANALYSIS

While this article cannot, in the space available, provide detailed reports of the respective individual journeys, it does illuminate aspects of their shared experiences. All participants described their aspiration to teach as the main reason for applying for a technician role (although at the time none had envisaged that working in technical support would eventually lead them to a career

in academia). One of the clearest messages emerging from the interview data is that the technician role provides a developmental framework through which all participants found themselves able to develop their disciplinary and pedagogic skills while also being supported to maintain their practice. From the technicians' perspective, the university appraisal system was an enabling process that aligned their own development needs with that of the institution and provided the time and autonomy to upskill. The same appraisal system was less valued from an academic perspective. One participant observed:

> The most rewarding – the rewarding thing – about the technician role was the opportunity for continual self-improvement. I had the time to improve my own skills and keep up to speed with the technical aspects of the discipline and feed updated knowledge into my own teaching […] in my academic role I haven't had any training yet […] unless being a fire warden counts?

The participants' experiences support McCaffery's assertion that technicians are more likely to engage with university development agendas (2010: 202). Their experiences also support Smith et al., who observe that for technicians to maintain their competency, 'continuous opportunities for updating and learning are required' (2004: 17). Additionally, all participants were collaborating in their own disciplinary and pedagogic development within a supportive technical community of practice.

Participants also identified formal qualifications as an important element of their development as technicians that enabled their subsequent transition. In one instance this included working towards a Ph.D. Other examples described included HEA fellowships, teaching qualifications (PGC) and software certification, in addition to less formal activities such as attending seminars, tradeshows, participation in the university teaching observation scheme or simply being afforded the opportunity and resources to produce an artwork for use in their teaching.

All participants described feeling empowered by being a member of the wider technical team. One technician said that he felt he 'made a difference and felt part of a bigger whole with a voice throughout the university'. For another participant, the aspect of being a technician that he enjoyed the most was working broadly across disciplinary boundaries to support learners and engage in collaborations in a way that is not possible in his academic position. All described teaching as the most enjoyable part of the technician role and had chosen a career in academia because they believed it would enable them to focus on teaching. Other shared drivers included salary, career progression, status and the ability to control what was taught though curriculum design.

An unexpected outcome of participants' testimonies is that they found the reality of academic work considerably different to the perception that they had previously held. It is surprising that they felt this way after transitioning because they had previous experience working closely with academic colleagues.

> I thought that academics would arrive at about 10am and stroll out the door at 4pm. My own experience as an academic is that I am in at 8am, I work all day and leave at 5:15pm to go home and work more in the evenings. I also find myself working at weekends (although I did that

> as a technician too), my preconception was that academics swanned around, I know now that really isn't the case.

As academics, all participants felt that they were working harder, longer and with greater responsibility and accountability. All were working in small academic course teams and described feeling relatively disempowered and disconnected in relation to the university. All perceived that their professional development was less important to the university as academics than when they were technicians. McCaffery asserts that for academics themselves, 'as a culture of knowers rather than learners', professional development is seen as a low priority (2010: 202). McCaffery's argument is inconsistent with the insights gained from this study. Participants demonstrated an appetite for their own development as academics, although they felt constrained by the lack of opportunity. Differences in the value of PDR were attributed to a combination of time pressures, the lower priority that appraisal is assigned within academic teams and the perceived lack of management acumen (and genuine engagement) of academic line managers. Whitchurch observes that non-academic staff 'increasingly have academic credentials paralleling those of their academic colleagues' (2012: 52), which is consistent with the experiences of two participants. In one instance, the former technician is the only lecturer within their academic team who holds a teaching qualification.

Participants spoke candidly and at length about the additional pressures that they felt as academics and while all were committed to HE, two of the three did not envisage a long-term career as academics. Interviews suggest that those who engaged with performativity metrics to transition find that as new academics themselves, they are exposed to the same pressures believed to be unbundling academic roles. The voices of the participants do lend credence that market conditions, vocationalism and diversification of HE have been conducive to elevating the status and pedagogies of technicians. The ubiquity of technical teaching and establishment of technical/teaching roles appear to have diminished the previously unbridgeable 'chasm' between academic and support camps. The visualization of Whitchurch's third space (Figure 1) inadequately illustrates the remit and professional identities of many of the creative arts technicians that I have worked with. Insights from this study suggest that these camps have evolved to overlap and coexist within a 'synchronous workspace' (Figure 3). Tasks such as lesson planning, developing learning materials, teaching, tutorials, providing formative feedback, supporting research, conceptual development of student work, facilitating interdisciplinary and experimental projects, evaluating new and emerging technologies, and writing funding bids for equipment are examples of tasks that I propose may be considered 'synchronous'.

McCaffery suggests that within HE, 'each individual's line manager is the most important factor in an employee's effectiveness' (2010: 186). Within this study, participants (as technicians) reported working within an expansive culture, able to engage with development opportunities routinely and came to foster a sense of themselves as learners and workers. In my own view, the impact of line management in fostering these identities should not be underrated. Institutions should consider developing the management philosophies of those who manage technicians, ensuring that they engender open, collaborative teams that integrate with academic colleagues rather than perpetuate the default 'them and us' opposition of camps. Institutions should also take notice that participants of this study found it easier to transition to academic

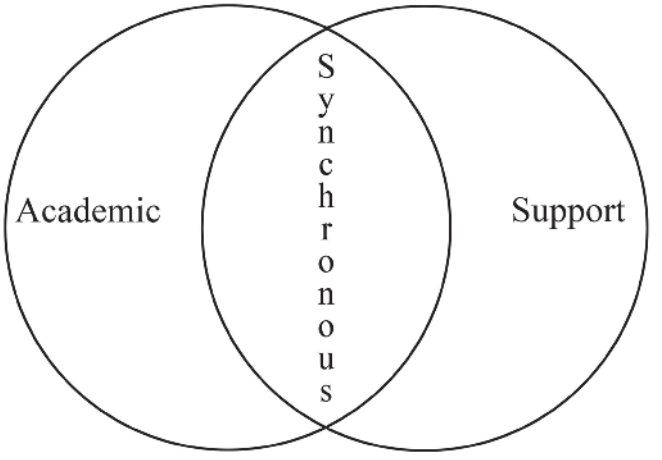

Figure 3: The synchronous work space.

roles outside of the institution that they had previously worked as technicians. One participant noted that 'technicians have to leave the institution to progress because they become typecast and it is hard to escape the technical label'. Proactive institutions might take heed and work towards creative 'permissive frameworks' (Halstead 2012: 8) to incentivize internal progression (within technical teams or those transitioning to academia) to retain their best staff. Institutions risk investing in the development of their most capable and motivated technicians only to lose them to competitors or industry. At a sector level, new practice-based academics (from technical, industry or practitioner backgrounds) should be integrated rather than assimilated with traditional academics through improved induction and appraisal experiences that identify skills gaps to support their transition.

Another point of interest is that participants' desire to enter academia (and the notion that it was possible) emerged while working as a technician. Lindgren and Wahlin studied the characteristics and behaviours of boundary-crossing individuals and identified the importance of 'critical incidents' (2001: 369). This study suggests that for technicians with aspirations to transition between camps, critical incidents are more likely to be 'critical processes'. These could include studying for a qualification, undertaking academic work, participating in research or developing a rare skill set. For each participant, this led to a point where they envisaged a future in academia as an achievable goal.

CONCLUSION

While market forces, the sector and the institution can generate opportunities, it is the agency and action of the individual staff member that is the most important factor in their career progression. Lewis and Gospel concluded: 'technicians themselves need to be more willing to avail themselves of, opportunities for training in a broader range of skills than is required for their current role' (2015: 36). The three participants in this study each demonstrated an intrinsic appetite for their own professional

development while working as a technician. For technicians with aspirations to transition their own careers to academia the message from this study appears to be: excel as a technician; engage with professional development activities; earn the academic credentials on offer; collaborate with academic colleagues; and continue with your own practice and gain research insights. The caveat is that academic roles are not suited to all who work in technical roles and the external perception of academic work can prove to be very different from reality.

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