ON THE FRINGE AND IN THE THICK OF IT:
Inhabiting Whitchurch's *Third Space* as SLW Professionals

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Introduction/Background

- The number of international students in graduate-level programs in the U.S. has continued apace (Institute of International Education, 2013).

- Regardless of institutional requirements satisfied prior to matriculating into degree programs, many of these students face difficulties adjusting to and meeting the language demands of programs and can benefit from direct language support, particularly in writing (Waye, 2012).

Introduction/Background

- Administrative decision-making related to writing support is varied and complex, since administrators must consider:
    - the perceived needs & interests of the students,
    - institutional structure,
    - university mission, and
    - available resources, including trained personnel.

SLW Professionals

- Traditionally, SLW staff have served in either academic or support-services roles but are increasingly bridging the professional gap between these two positions.

Blended Professionals in the Third Space

- *Blended professionals*, whose "appointments [span] professional and academic domains" (Whitchurch, 2008: 382), characterize those who fill this niche.

- The *third space* describes where such blended work occurs, i.e., "emergent territory between academic and professional domains, which is colonised primarily by less bounded forms of professional" (377).

Blended Professionals in the Third Space

Blended Professionals have:

- Academic credentials,
- Institutional knowledge,
- Credibility,
- Strong ties to institutional networks,
- Alliances of key supporters of blended activities, and
- A lack of informal networks.

From Whitchurch (2013: 9-12; 70-73)

Blended Professionals can:

- Understand academic discourse and enter into academic debate,
- Manage the duality of 'belonging' and 'not belonging' to an academic space/ community,
- Work with ambiguity,
- Integrate professional and academic knowledge,
- Redefine existing space and boundaries, and
- Challenge the status quo.

SLW Blended Professionals

- SLW specialists working in the third space both conform to and deviate from the traditional SLW paths, which results in:
    - Collaborating with colleagues within and outside of administrative and academic programs,
    - Coping with impediments to and misunderstandings of role(s), and
    - Taking advantage of the possibilities of professional flexibility.

SLW Blended Professionals
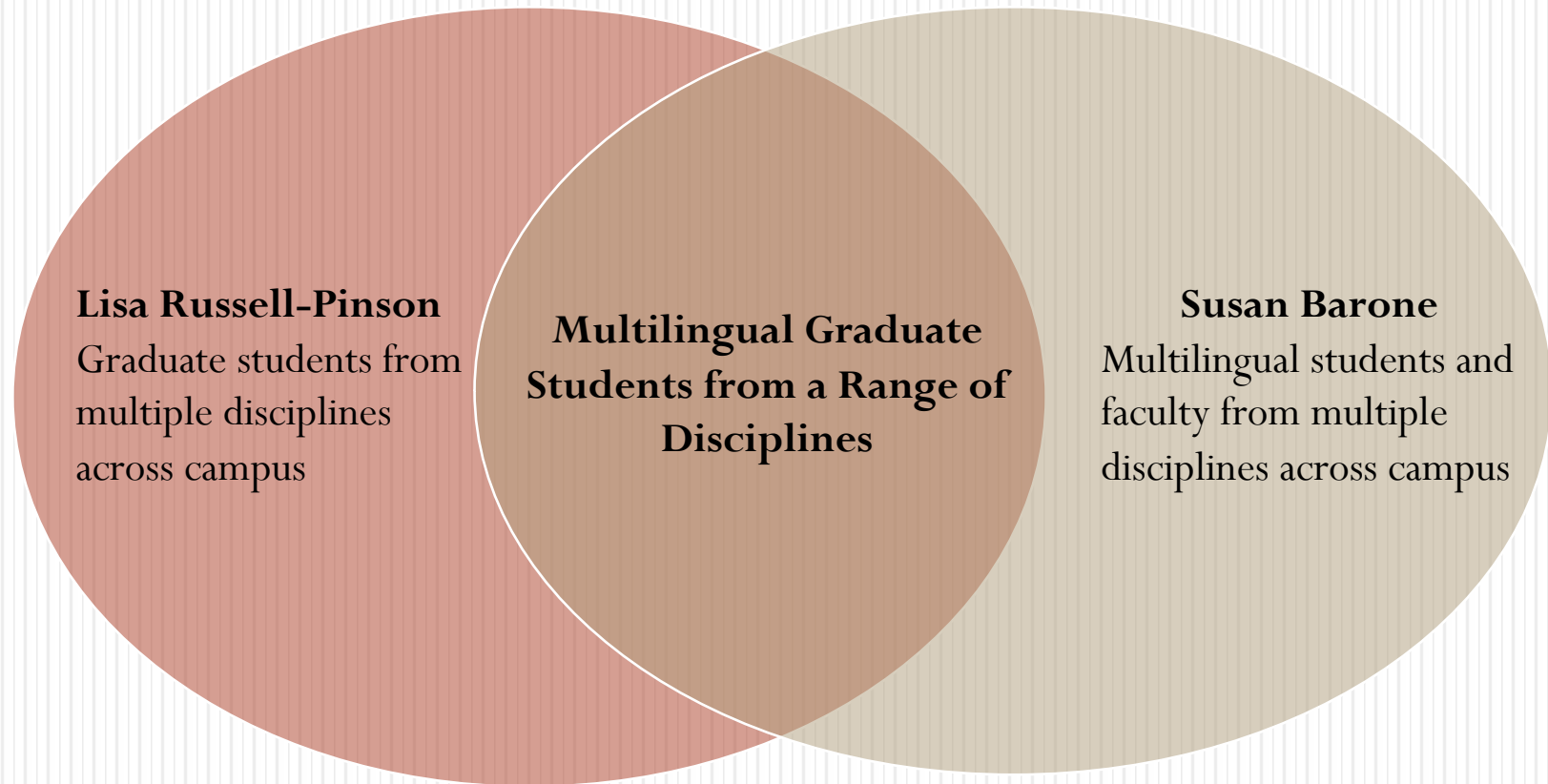
Lisa Russell-Pinson

- **Context:**
  - UNC Charlotte
  - The Graduate School
  - Faculty Associate for Graduate Writing; Adjunct Assistant Professor

Susan Barone

- **Context:**
  - Vanderbilt University
  - English Language Center/ Provost Office
  - Director; Affiliated faculty

Collaborative Perspectives & Student Populations

Lisa Russell–Pinson
Graduate students from multiple disciplines across campus

Multilingual Graduate Students from a Range of Disciplines

Susan Barone
Multilingual students and faculty from multiple disciplines across campus

SLW Blended Professionals

Lisa Russell-Pinson

- **Responsibilities:**
  - Developed and now teach a credit-bearing writing course for multilingual graduate students (GRAD 6010/8010);
  - Work with dissertation writers;
  - Develop and deliver workshops and presentations on graduate-level writing;
  - Serve as a resource on writing-related issues for graduate-level faculty; and
  - Collaborate with support programs, including the Writing Resource Center and the Counseling Center.

Susan Barone

- **Responsibilities:**
  - Serve as liaison to departments & centers;
  - Oversee development and teaching of relevant writing support courses and workshops for grad students; and
  - Oversee assessment of grad student writing within Language Center.

On the Fringe

Drawbacks for SLW professionals:

- Challenges in orienting to vastly different discourse communities and cultures,
- Varying expectations from those in traditional academic & professional roles,
- Barriers in accessing resources (e.g., funds, personnel, space…),
- Lack of visibility & need to self-promote, and
- Difficulty in connecting with professional peers.

On the Fringe

Benefits for SLW professionals:

- Developing both a breadth and a depth of professional knowledge,
- Providing new insights and objectivity to colleagues in other departments,
- Avoiding departmental disputes,
- Creating a "safe space" for students, and
- Having autonomy.

In the Thick of It

Drawbacks for SLW professionals:

- Perspectives on academic writing that are sometimes at odds with those of faculty in students' disciplines,
- The unrealistic expectation, among some faculty and administrators, that our work will "fix" the multilingual students' writing,
- The need to train/orient new blended professionals, which is time consuming and challenging, and
- The perception among some that we are "Jills of All Trades".

In the Thick of It

Benefits for SLW professionals:

- Developing professionally through cross-campus collaborations with:
  - Academic departments
  - Student services
  - Administrative units
- Having the flexibility to explore professional interests, and
- Taking risks in initiating new programs and services with few repercussions.

Way of the Future?

"Universities and academic life are becoming more complex and differentiated spaces…[As a result] individuals have created spaces for the exercise of principled personal autonomy and agency. Rather than being under threat, it appears that identities in academia are expanding and proliferating…" (Clegg, 2008: 330 & 343).

Recommendations

Developing SLW professionals should:

- Obtain strong academic credentials,
- Gain as much multidisciplinary knowledge and experience as they can, especially in STEM fields,
- Develop their administrative and supervisory skills,
- Expand job searches to include positions outside of traditional academic departments and structures, and
- Embrace the flexibility and opportunities for professional growth provided by work in the third space.

Contact Us

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