ASCILITE 2025
Future-Focused:
Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

LIFT as leadership practice: Cultivating identity, influence, and belonging for women in the third space

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In an era of rapid institutional and digital transformation, navigating leadership in higher education's third space presents complex identity challenges, particularly for women. Through an interactive autoethnographic process, five participants in the ASCILITE Community Mentoring Program for Women in Leadership (CMP-WiPL) explored these challenges over 18 months, combining personal reflection, peer dialogue, and professional identity practice. Through iterative cycles of self-assessment, professional identity building on LinkedIn, and collaborative discussions within our WiPL Community of Practice (CoP), the group created and refined the Leadership Identity Framework for Transformation (LIFT). Informed by theoretical models of professional identity, third space capabilities, and Communities of Practice, LIFT offers a practical and adaptable approach to scaffold identity development, address imposter syndrome, and fosters inclusive leadership. Findings highlight the power of collective sense-making, digital tools, and structured reflection in supporting professional growth. By framing leadership as a continuous reflective journey, this work provides a sustainable model for enabling confident, authentic leadership in higher education and the third space sectors shaped by uncertainty and change.

Keywords: professional identity, women leadership, third space, LIFT Framework, collective reflection, community of practice, autoethnography

Introduction

As third space educators working in the landscape of higher education, our careers and professional identities are at the "interface between professional and academic activity" (Whitchurch, 2013, p. 55), which surfaces unique challenges and opportunities. While the concept of the third space (Whitchurch, 2013) has gained traction in higher education, there remains limited practical guidance for professionals, particularly women, on how to develop and evidence their leadership identities within it. Existing frameworks often overlook the gendered experience of navigating this space. Prior research highlights the fluidity of roles in the third space and the challenges of defining professional identity in contexts that resist traditional academic/professional boundaries (Henderson et al., 2024; Bulei & Dinu, 2013). For women, these challenges are further compounded by systemic gender inequities and internalised barriers such as imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978).

This paper explores the journey and experiences of five women in leadership roles in this space, brought together through the ASCILITE Community Mentoring Program for Women in Leadership (CMP-WiPL). Over the course of 18 months, an autoethnographic approach guided the group's journey, culminating in the development and refinement of the Leadership Identity Framework for Transformation (LIFT). In this paper,

we refer to it as the LIFT framework, a resource strengthened by lived experience, shared experiences, and collective learning. Building on an earlier digital poster this paper presents an updated version of the LIFT framework (Ngo et al, 2024a), incorporating benchmarking data and reflective insights gathered throughout our journey. The framework is both a product and a process and is intended to be a practical resource for other women professionals navigating leadership pathways in the third space.

Looking back to move forward - our methods

The WiPL Community of Practice (CoP) comprises women from different walks of life, disciplines, ages and career stages. A common thread across the group, both mentee and mentor, was the desire to develop ourselves and our own professional identities as women leaders in the third space. The group chose LinkedIn as our platform to enhance our professional identities and build professional networks. It was selected for its collaborative potential and its common use by third space professionals (Ngo et al, 2024b). An interactive autoethnographic study was conducted as described by Chang (2008) to study how LinkedIn could enhance our professional identities and increase networking opportunities for us as women in leadership roles in higher education and the third space. Each of the WiPL CoP members had a presence in LinkedIn, with varying involvement and interaction. The group showed different levels of confidence in engaging with others on the LinkedIn platform, and some experienced imposter syndrome, a feeling of self-doubt often seen in women (Clance & Ames, 1978).

Stage 1: What we did – first round of autoethnography

We began a five-step iterative process (Figure 1 below) somewhat similar to the five stages of Design Thinking – Empathise, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Test (Dam, 2025):
- Step 1 - We started on a journey of self-reflection and self-assessment of our own LinkedIn profiles.
- Step 2 - We reflected on what we thought were the positive and negative aspects of interacting with the platform, the impact it has on our own profiles and levels of engagement. This was shared within our CoP, a safe space where we could regularly give each other suggestions to enhance our profiles.
- Step 3 - Each member chose five women they identified as leaders, reviewing their LinkedIn profiles.
- Step 4 - The data was analysed to determine why the person was perceived as a leader and how they presented their profiles. Best practices were recorded and used to enhance our profiles.
- Step 5 - We shared our enhanced profiles within our CoP, based on peer feedback and self-review.
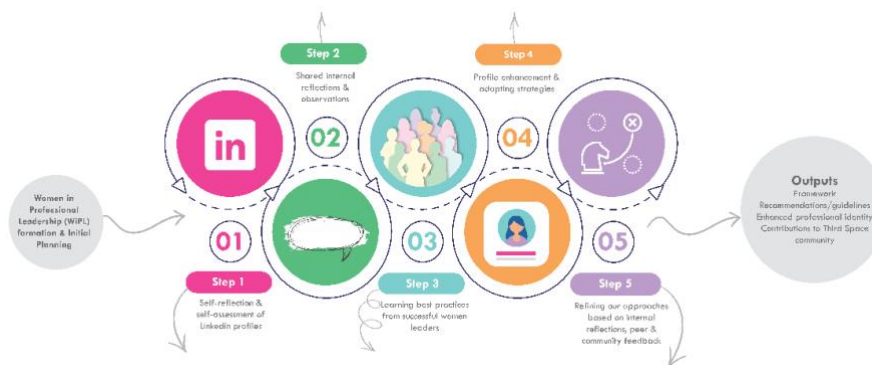

Figure 1. Five-Step iterative process (Ngo et al, 2024b)

While the original goal may have been to develop ourselves as leaders, it quickly became clear that true leadership is also reflected in our ability to support and influence others. Therefore, we created a framework for women leaders in the third space (LIFT), which combines communities of practice, third space Capabilities and professional identity (Ngo et al, 2024b). The framework is based on Wenger's (1998) communities of practice theory, the conceptual frameworks for professional identity (Bulei & Dinu, 2013) and third space capabilities (Boreland et al., 2025). We also developed guidance on building LinkedIn brands, networking for success, managing imposter syndrome and content strategy development, all presented as a poster Women Leading in the Third Space: Leveraging LinkedIn to Build Professional Identity (Ngo et al, 2024b) at the ASCILITE 2024 conference and the third space Symposium (2024).
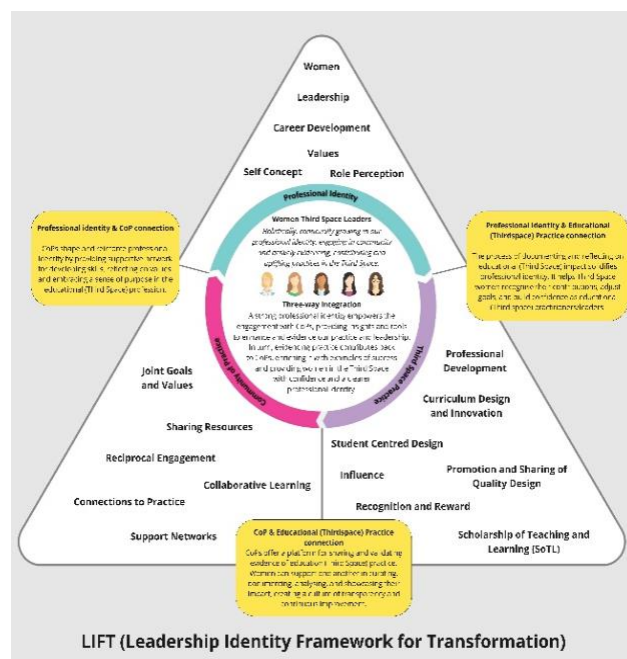
To further explore how other women were using LinkedIn to accelerate their progress, the team created a short survey for International Women's Day 2025. The survey asked if they were using LinkedIn primarily to enhance their professional identity, build third space practice, as a community of practice, leaving a category for other uses. The survey ran for two weeks, to date, garnering 630 impressions and reaching 302 members. Of the responses received, 76% use it primarily to enhance their professional identity and 24% use LinkedIn as a community of practice (Tyrell, 2025). The survey, whilst not definitive, suggests that like the WiPL CoP, the primary use for other women in the third space is to build their professional identities and profiles.

Stage 2: What we did next – second round of autoethnography

In this second round of the five-step iterative process we took a cyclical approach, combining individual reflection, group discussion, and collaborative analysis, which is a well-established approach used in collaborative autoethnography (Taylor et al, 2014). We used a shared google sheet based on the LIFT framework elements, providing systematic data collection while maintaining the reflective nature of autoethnography. This prompted reflections on our abilities, skills and attributes (Step 1). Individual reflections and group discussions were iterative as we discussed challenges in aligning reflections with different framework elements and returned to revise or add further reflections to the matrix (Step 2). Thematic analysis was deductive, based on the task at hand, which was to test the LIFT framework as a developmental tool. The process highlighted areas we found difficult to map to, overlaps between frameworks, and solidified our understanding of the categories and our engagement in different areas. We also gained a better understanding of best practices regarding creating and using a framework (step 3). This information was used to improve the framework to make it easier for others to use (Step 4). The final step is sharing our updated framework to the wider third Space community for other aspiring women leaders to use (Step 5).

The refined framework

Figure 2. The LIFT framework (Ngo et al, 2024a)

The LIFT framework (Figure 2, left) integrates three complementary theoretical constructs: Professional Identity, third space capabilities, and Communities of Practice (CoPs). In this way it addresses both individual growth and collective learning within professional networks, providing a comprehensive understanding of professional development and emerging leadership. Professional identity, as described by Bulei & Dinu (2013), is dynamic and evolving, and is particularly important for aspiring women leaders as they navigate new leadership pathways. It encompasses how individuals perceive and present their professional selves through their competencies, values and practices. Understanding third space competencies is enhanced through Boreland et al's (2025) framework, with its seven components for evidencing practice. It also serves to focus efforts and develop career pathways. Finally, CoPs work to foster collective learning and growth (Wenger, 1998).

Results/Discussion

The autoethnographic reflections revealed shared challenges, transformations and growth experienced by our group across 18 months of engagement. Through cycles of reflective practice, peer feedback, collaborative testing and review of the LIFT framework, four key themes emerged. These themes illustrate a developmental progression from initial challenges with professional identity to transformative outcomes achieved through structured support and reflection.

1. Ambiguity of third space professional identity and the pervasiveness of imposter syndrome

A theme regularly discussed throughout the journey was the challenge in defining our professional identities as third space professionals, which was tied to the experience of imposter syndrome. As one of our WiPL group reflected, 'Having been in higher education for over 12 years but moving between positions and departments, I struggled to define my professional identity, often feeling like a bit of an imposter, knowing a bit about a lot of things but not always confident to voice an opinion, not really seeing myself as an expert'. The lack of standards and formality in the field was recognised as contributing to these identity challenges, and has been discussed by others (Henderson et al., 2024), one member noting it's 'hard to reflect [on professional identity] in terms of explaining what are the professional standards, role perception and competencies.'

2. Transformative power of Communities of Practice (CoPs)

Given these common identity challenges within the group, our WiPL CoP emerged as a key support factor in navigating our professional identity challenges and fostering growth. Members valued the reciprocal nature of this support, with one noting the importance of 'being with like-minded people supporting each other' because it 'helped to hear how others tackled [imposter syndrome and defining professional identity].' Third space capabilities were clarified through shared experiences and validation, with one member saying: 'it's also helpful to see and admire what other people are doing and also see them appreciate what I'm doing. This kind of encouragement has been responsible for a lot of my growth.' This growth extended beyond individual growth, with another member saying peer collaborations 'shaped my evolving professional identity, one that centres on uplifting others.'

3. A structured approach to empower women leaders in the third space

While the CoP offered essential support, members recognised the need for a structured approach to our development. All three parts of the LIFT framework were essential in assessing our current position, understanding our capabilities, and refining our direction. As one member reflected, LIFT 'helped me define the third space, recognise myself as a third spacer and organise my understanding of where I am in the space.' It provided language and structure for self-evaluation, enabling clearer articulation of values, competencies and contributions. Utilising the framework also supported ongoing leadership development and improved role clarity through an iterative process of self-assessment and refinement. One group member described how 'the structured, cyclical process of the LIFT journey, encompassing self-reflection, peer feedback, and iterative learning, paired with meaningful and authentic engagement with my WiPL CoP [helped me] move away from self-doubt, towards a more grounded and confident sense of professional self.'

4. Outcomes of increased confidence, clearer identity, and leadership development

The collective journey of discovery and application of the LIFT Framework revealed significant outcomes: increased confidence, a clearer professional identity, and strengthened leadership capabilities. One member noted the experience made them 'a little more confident in myself and stop second-guessing so much'. The impact of this was felt by another who said it was 'particularly impactful, enabling a clearer recognition of my individual contributions, impact and leadership potential, which has since supported my career progression'. Another found greater clarity around their perception of leadership, saying 'leadership is not about titles, but impact' and sees her role as leading 'meaningful change (in yourself and with others)'. These reflections demonstrate that using the LIFT framework successfully fosters professional growth and a deeper understanding of leadership practice.

The LIFT framework has been developed and validated through a longitudinal, collaborative autoethnographic process by a small but diverse group, reflecting on our own professional practice and experience, in a safe space. The data was deidentified for the purposes of this paper to protect our privacy. We acknowledge the need for broader engagement and invite other third space professionals to critically engage with the LIFT framework, apply it within their own contexts, and contribute to its ongoing refinement and evolution.

Conclusion

The LIFT framework offers both a conceptual foundation and practical guidance for women developing identities in the third space. Drawing on established theoretical models of professional identity, third space capabilities, and Communities of Practice, the framework was shaped and validated through an interactive autoethnographic process grounded in lived experience, reflection and peer dialogue/exchange. Through collective sense-making and professional identity work, participants gained clarity, confidence, and shared language to articulate their evolving professional selves. The LIFT framework supports this process by providing a structured, replicable model that fosters authentic and inclusive leadership development. This study foregrounds the often unseen journeys of women leaders navigating challenges such as imposter syndrome and role ambiguity. In a sector defined by continuous change and complexity, the LIFT framework provides a sustainable approach to professional learning, one that values reflection, uncertainty, and growth as integral to the leadership journey.

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Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.

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