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Submitted by KerryAnn O'Meara on January 24, 2019 - 3:00am

Years ago, I joined a knitting group. I wasn't particularly good at or interested in knitting. I joined because the knitting circle was made up of mothers of young children who were balancing some combination of family, work and community roles, like me. Once a week we gathered -- some bringing sleeping babies, some on lunch breaks from work -- and enjoyed each other's company.

We made women's felt handbags that would be sold to contribute to a local charity. Although having this charitable goal was important, it was not the main reason that we attended the group. We were there for the company, the laughter, the intimacy, the food we shared and the resonance we felt as we told familiar stories about children, co-workers, partners and financial pressures.

At the time, work was hard. For many reasons, I was often alone. At home, I had three beautiful children under the age of 5 and a Newfoundland, who, despite the help of a great partner, needed a lot from me. That often meant little sleep or time to recharge. I distinctly remember sitting one day in the knitting circle taking in the atmosphere in the room, realizing how safe and supported I felt. I was so grateful to be there. I could breathe -- and beside others who were doing the same.

Years later, I realized that I had experienced what sociologist [Ray Oldenburg](#) ⁽¹⁾ called ⁽²⁾ a "third space," a place that is outside home (first space) and work (second space) where people gather and interact. Post offices, barbershops and knitting circles are common third spaces. Oldenburg described third spaces as being neutral places with few formal obligations that have regular participants but welcome newcomers. Hierarchy is not emphasized in such spaces. There are few prerequisites to join, and that contributes to a leveling of status among members.

Members of third spaces often feel that some aspect of their identity belongs in that space. Third spaces are restorative and offer psychological support to individuals and communities. All the things I've described are true of third spaces more generally, and they were what I found in my knitting circle. I felt welcome, at home, and free of the constraints I'd encountered in both my primary and secondary spaces.

Third spaces play an even more vital role for individuals who are part of underrepresented groups. Homi K. Bhabha argued in *The Location of Culture* that third spaces are places where colonized or oppressed groups imagine their liberation. Such in-between spaces, especially in higher education settings, allow for women and underrepresented minority graduate students and faculty members to find themselves within a critical mass, to let their full selves show, to identify role models and peer collaborators, to gain the skills and perspectives needed to navigate oppressive spaces -- and, more generally, to breathe.

In such third, in-between spaces, some of the underlying logics, assumptions and norms that make people feel excluded and alone within their departments and fields are unmasked and made visible. Through conversation with others who share similar experiences and value, members of third spaces can decide which logics they might reject, seek to change or transgress. Some aspects of these spaces may be scripted intentionally to create these conditions, while others develop organically.

As director of the University of Maryland's ADVANCE program and a professor who studies academic careers, I have seen the power of third spaces for faculty members and graduate students firsthand. At the University of Maryland, we created faculty peer networks that in many ways serve as third spaces for women, underrepresented and professional-track faculty members, and those interested in academic leadership. Such peer networks meet monthly, usually over breakfast or lunch, and have an instrumental purpose (e.g., support for career advancement and professional growth), but are also very much structured as third spaces. The networks draw faculty members from across the campus, so they are constructed outside departments and colleges. Visible role models lead the groups, and authenticity and transparency are emphasized through conversations, stories, discussions of articles and career strategies.

Likewise, I have observed the power of third spaces for graduate students through the University of Maryland System's Alliances for Graduate Education and the Professoriate, or AGE program, supported by the National Science Foundation program. Called PROMISE and led by Renetta Tull, it has long operated as a third space. A student from an underrepresented minority group, who may be one of only a few in a graduate program cohort, can find critical mass with other students and enter a space that is intentionally created to help them be successful in completing their degree and advancing into their career.

ADVANCE peer networks and AGE programs help individuals navigate aspects of their departments and colleges that they find opaque. They also can be places to find colleagues who resonate with common experiences and challenges. Third spaces are a powerful way to increase retention, strengthen on-campus peer networks, enhance faculty and graduate student agency, and create a sense of belonging.

To be sure, third spaces are not a panacea for all that ails higher education. For one, they are not particularly effective ways to change what needs fixing in the cultures of home departments. Real and concrete challenges experienced in those departments and shared bravely in the company of colleagues stay within the conversation circles of the third space by choice. Thus, many things that need to change go untouched.

Likewise, peer networks organized for women and underrepresented groups are often deemed unnecessary and divisive, much like the critique shared by Spelman president emerita Beverly Daniel Tatum in her seminal book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*^[3] Peer networks can be invisible to people in majority groups, and when they are visible, they are often misunderstood. Third-space networks are therefore rarely the best vehicles to increase campus awareness of implicit and explicit biases or to take on systemic disparities in workload, salaries, recognition or opportunity.

But imagine for a moment that you, a woman, are a new assistant professor hired into a department where no women have been hired and tenured in 20 years, if at all. Or imagine being an African American graduate student in a computer science department with few, if any, other underrepresented minority students and where you are regularly introduced as proof that the department has addressed “diversity.” Regardless of the quality of your work or of your mentorship and preparation, you are very likely to experience distinct challenges. Wouldn’t it be helpful to look across a room, even once a month for two hours, and see others with a common identity? Wouldn’t the resonance and relief of that experience, as well as the conversation and strategies shared among those experiencing similar challenges, add to your agency and well-being?

It did for me. As bell hooks aptly described in *Teaching to Transgress*^[4], such meeting spaces allow individuals, including faculty members and graduate students, to “transgress” aspects of their fields, departments or everyday experiences that make them feel excluded and question whether they belong and will succeed. Well-crafted third spaces allow members to breathe and reimagine another way to be an academic, teach, pursue a research agenda and balance work and life. Faculty members who successfully navigate their early careers and advance with the support of colleagues in third spaces then get to be part of rewriting the narrative about faculty and work life in that department and discipline.

Faculty members and academic leaders trying to make higher education more inclusive of women and underrepresented minority faculty are trying to fly a plane and rebuild it at the same time. Third spaces give faculty members on the journey a way station. Such spaces should be honored and strengthened.

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