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Boundary Spanning Roles in Communities & Organizations: Implications for Adult Educators

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Abstract: As adult educators, we work across communities, programs, and organizations. We serve as, work with, and build capacity of boundary spanners. Our collaborations connect people across boundaries and convince others to work together for a common goal. This manuscript explores boundary spanners in three contexts: community partners, contractors, and volunteers.

Introduction

In our highly-networked, trans-disciplinary, global society, the ability to span boundaries is an increasingly critical role. As adult educators, we work across communities, programs, and organizations. We serve as, work with, and build the capacity of boundary spanners. Our collaborations involve connecting people across traditional boundaries and convince others to work together for a common goal. Along the way, these interactions extend the reach of our scholarship and engagement. In this manuscript, we offer and examine the roles of boundary spanners in connecting higher education institutions and organizations to communities and connecting scholarship to practice. Specifically, we will (1) introduce the theoretical and definitional aspects of boundary spanning, (2) consider three distinct areas of investigation and practice of boundary spanning in adult education, and discuss the research and practice implications of boundary spanning as a form of adult education and the critical role of adult educators.

Theoretical & Definitional Aspects of Boundary Spanning

Boundary spanning is an emerging theory. Building on socio-technical theory (Emery & Marek, 1962; Trist & Bamforth, 1951) and open-systems theory (Scott, 2002), boundary spanning is typically defined as “the bridge between an organization and its exchange partners” (Scott, 1992, p. 196). Aldrich and Herker (1977) define behavior of boundary spanners as processing information from various environments and providing representation to stakeholders outside the organization. Williams (2011) cites boundary spanners as “individuals who have a dedicated job role or responsibility to work in a multi-agency and multi-sectoral environment and to engage in boundary spanning activities, processes and practices” (p. 27).

These boundary spanning activities, processes and practices, “tackle common issues, to promote better co-ordination and integration of public services, to reduce duplication, to make the best use of scarce resources and to meet gaps in service provision and to satisfy unmet needs” (Williams, 2011, p. 27). Other scholars argue boundary-spanning behaviors do not require dedicated job roles or responsibilities, should be examined at both individual and organizational levels and include negotiating “power and balance between the organization and external agents to achieve mutual objectives, and they also [include] represent[ing] the perception, expectations, and ideas of each side to the other” (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010, p. 638). Boundary spanners fulfill roles by gathering critical information, obtaining

feedback and perceptions from different sources and then interpreting and translating that information back to others. Since they are often highly visible or well-known members of their organization or community, boundary spanners also bring a sense of trust (Goldring & Sims, 2005).

Weerts and Sandmann (2010) provide a model of conceptualizing roles and functions of boundary spanners in higher education community engagement. The model creates a continuum considering social and technical roles boundary spanners play and the connection to the community and the organization. Weerts and Sandmann (2010) identify four distinct roles of boundary spanners: internal engagement advocate, external champion, technical expert and community-based problem solver. These roles are fluid. Individuals may find themselves working to varying degrees across the four quadrants of the boundary spanning roles rather than in a concrete set of expectations.

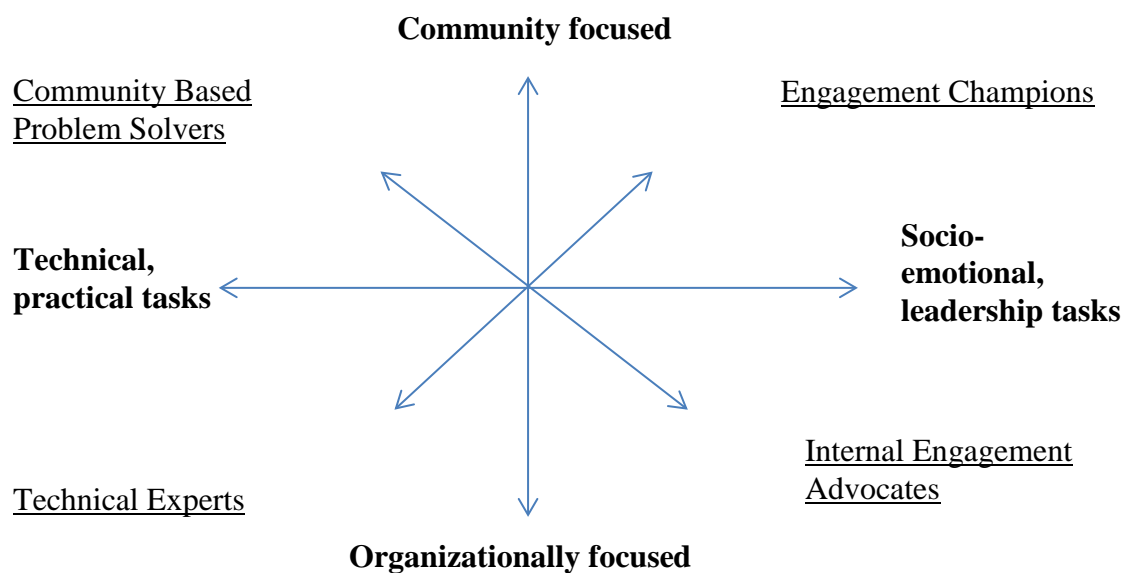


Figure 1. Boundary spanning roles as adapted by Weerts & Sandmann (2010)

Along two perpendicular axes task orientation and social closeness are the two domains differentiating the ways boundary spanners “reduce conflict and facilitate spanning goals” (Weerts & Sandman, 2010 p. 708). Task orientation “relates to an individual’s formal job role and how it influences that person’s relationship with external constituents” (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010, p. 709). Those serving as boundary spanners due to their formal position will take a leadership or advocacy role for boundary spanning, leading to a socio-emotional or leadership task orientation. Others will focus on the technical, practical tasks. The tasks spanners may also be influenced by personal characteristics and skillsets individuals have in relation to others around them. These differences may influence variation along the scale.

The second domain, social closeness is “the degree to which the spanner is aligned with the external partner versus the organization that he or she represents” (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010, p. 709). Similar to the task orientation, one’s formal position influences social closeness, but other personal and

organizational characteristics including personal and professional background, experience, disciplinary expertise (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010), and loyalty (Miller, 2008) also impact task orientation.

The model is not predictive of future roles, but examines the current roles individuals have when organizations engage with others. As Weerts and Sandmann (2010) noted, should this model be generalizable to boundary spanners other than those in community engagement at research universities, “this knowledge may help practitioners create role differentiation strategies...internally and externally” (p. 723). Boundary spanners may exist in communities, as contractors and as volunteers. In all three cases, the behaviors and roles have implications to both boundary spanning theory and to the field of adult education.

Boundary Spanning Roles of Communities & Organizations: Adult Educators Understanding Community Boundary Spanning

Kathryn Rose Adams

University-community partnerships have seen an increase in support through funding and government mandates, generating millions of dollars (Hawkins, Shapiro, & Fagan, 2010). With such financial opportunities available for community engagement initiatives, it is important that university-community partnerships are successful. The failure of nearly half of all university-community partnerships (Zakocs & Edwards, 2006) indicates the need for more research in order to better understand when to implement trainings, interventions, and how to best sustain them. A promising area of focus is the people who play leadership roles that are able to span the boundaries that exist between partnerships. When engaging in university-community partnerships, it is important to be able to identify or develop competent community boundary spanners.

Boundary spanners have the ability to unite unlikely groups around a common goal (Miller, 2008). Fulfilling roles of boundary spanners include gathering critical information, obtaining feedback and perceptions from the community or university environment through their stakeholder networks, and then interpreting and translating that information back into the partnership. When engaging in university-community partnerships, it is important to be able to identify the boundary spanners. Current research focuses on boundary spanners who hold institutionalized roles, such as university employees (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010), social workers (Miller, 2008), business professionals (Chand & Tung, 2011; Williams, 2002), and nurses (Williams, 2011). When leaders of community engagement are considered, it is from the standpoint of the faculty or academic administration. There is little research around the perspectives and experiences of the community partners, and who are spanning the boundaries of the community.

Thus, the purpose of this qualitative instrumental multi-site case study (Stake, 1995) was to examine the characteristics, roles, and motivations of community boundary spanners in university-community partnerships. In this study, ten community members, identified by institutional partners as being boundary spanners, shared their experiences and beliefs of their roles, motivations, and characteristics as community partners of a university-community partnership. Their impressions were utilized to better understand the quintain, or the common condition or experience across cases that bind cases together (Stake, 2006). Examining the similarities and differences in the themes identified for all ten individual cases provide a deeper understanding of the quintain, and the experiences of community boundary spanners.

The roles identified by the community boundary spanners were examined through the lens of the Weerts & Sandmann (2010) framework for social closeness and task orientation. The final outcome of the cross-case analysis resulted in four new quadrants of the Weerts & Sandmann (2010) framework,

situated from the community perspectives: engaged employee, reciprocity recipient, connection companion, and community champion. While each of the quadrants contains aspects of the community boundary spanners characteristics, roles, and motivations, and the case studies were situated within a distinct quadrant, the roles can fluid and individuals may find themselves moving along the continuum of the framework functions.

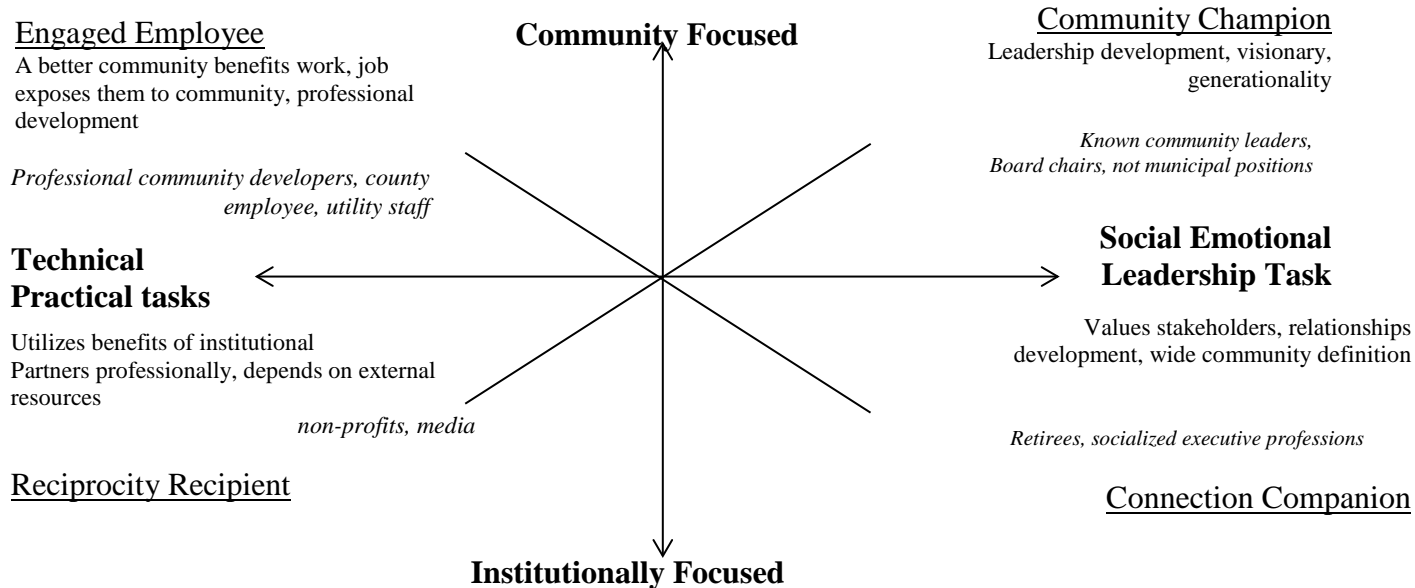


Figure 2. Boundary spanning roles from the perspective of a community partner in university-community engagement

Boundary spanners unite people across traditional boundaries, convince others to work together for a common goal, and build lasting working relationships. With an instrumental case study investigating the roles, characteristics, and motivations of community boundary spanners in university-community partnerships as the basis for discussion, a new complimentary and competing perspective of the community actors in university-community partnerships emerges. Considering community partners and their roles as boundary spanners advances the dialogue with a lens of the community-based individual in focus, but the information provides institutional partners with tools to advance their partnerships through leadership and relationship building training. With a deeper understanding of community partners, higher education institutions can be reflective about developing boundary spanners, as well as more effectively identifying and sustaining relationships with community boundary spanners.

**Boundary Spanning Roles of Communities & Organizations:
Adult Educators as Contractors**

Casey D. Mull

The role of government is in the midst of change. Since President Clinton’s National Performance Review, fewer civil servants provide direct services to the citizenry. Goldsmith and Eggers (2004) offer a historical background and the current state of government services. Historically, the

various levels of government—federal, state, and local—have delivered services through vertical integration. Government has served as a one-stop shop. Since the mid-1990s government has increased outsourcing or contracting out services that are not inherently governmental.

Rather than providing direct services to individuals and communities, the government uses other public and private organizations to serve as direct care providers in these functions it determines not to be inherently governmental. Some categories of inherently governmental activities are obvious, such as public safety and national defense. Others are not. The federal government continues to revise and reissue definitions of activities as inherently governmental, “so procurement personnel are often left to make judgments about whether certain activities classify or not” (Kim & Brown, 2012, p. 687).

As government continues to contract out functions that are complex and not inherently governmental, some traditional skills of government employees may relocate to the not-for-profit or private sector. As a result, the knowledge, skills and abilities of civil servants have and will continue to change. Civil servants need additional skills in managing contracts and the network of direct providers, rather than the individuals themselves, hired under these contracts (Cooper, 2003). Without effective contract writers and program managers, this diverse network of independent contractors and contracted organizations may have lofty goals and worthy objectives, but may operate with such a narrow scope across the numerous organizations in the network that they lack direction across the complex, unique problems facing individuals, groups and communities. Boundary spanning individuals assist in seeing through the noise of these complex issues, operating on the periphery of the primary organization to which they belong.

The Department of Defense offers a large organization to examine contingent employees, or contractors as they have many different types of contingent employees. Contingent employees include those in fixed term contracts such as those negotiated through a temporary staffing agency, direct-hire contingents who have an on-going relationship—such as lawyers on retainer, historically—and also independent contractors who sell their services for a fixed-term or over the duration of a project (Connelly & Gallagher, 2006). Those hired on a fixed-term contract through a temp agency may be the most well-known type of contingent employee. The second form of contingent employee, independent contractors are self-employed and seek specific free-lance jobs where an individual can complete the task or assignment. The final type of contingent employee is the part-time employee hired by an organization and called in to complete responsibilities as part of a “reserve workforce that is drafted on an as-needed basis that may not always be systematic or predictable” (Connelly & Gallagher, 2006, p. 96). The Department of Defense uses all types of contingent employees. Unlike the example used above, fixed-term contracts can include professional positions for an extended period of weeks, months and even years. With some of the contingent workforce on a fixed-term contract with ability for renewal, the contracted employee may work for the same organization for a decade or more, mirroring the career civil servants. Simply by their position working for one organization but physically located within another organization, contractors operate informally as a boundary spanner.

Boundary spanners can be effective in postmodern organizations that operate under a systems approach, building networks and collaborations to accomplish tasks. Scholars identify boundary spanners as having skills to cultivate relationships, communicate effectively and navigate a political charged environment; they “are characterized by their ability to engage with others and deploy effective relational and interpersonal competencies” (Williams, 2002, p. 110). Boundary spanners also build trust with the groups with which they work (Friedman & Podolny, 1992; Miller, 2008; Williams, 2002).

Universities, land-grant universities in particular, have been engaged with their local, state, national and even global communities for over 350 years (Boyer, 1996). In the oft-quoted work, Boyer (1990) highlights the four overlapping functions of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. In explaining why scholarship of application is essential, Boyer (1990) quotes Oscar Handlin sharing, “our troubled planet ‘can no longer afford the luxury of pursuits confined to an ivory tower...[S]cholarship has to prove its worth not on its own terms but by service to the nation and the world” (p. 23).

These collegiate institutions have used boundary spanning employees to collaborate, build partnerships and apply the scholarship of the institution of higher learning to the community around them and build a “two-way approach in which institutions and community partners collaborate to develop and apply knowledge” (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010, p. 632). The Extension-Military Partnership, including the 4-H/Military Partnership (Huebner, Mancini, Bowen, & Orthner, 2009), offers an example of boundary spanning adult educators who serve as contractors in the Department of Defense. These non-traditional contractors provide an example how one level of government may even outsource to another government entity to build its network of providers and governance. Military OneSource is another example from the private sector arena of contracting in the Department of Defense. Military OneSource provides military service members and “their families with comprehensive information on every aspect of military life including deployment, reunion, relationships, grief, spouse employment and education, parenting and child care, and much more” (“About Military OneSource,” 2013). The Extension-Military Partnership and Military OneSource accomplish their missions similarly. Whether their employee-contractors identify themselves as adult educators, they perform activities in the field of adult education and follow effective adult education techniques. These adult educators who provide these services work directly for a for-profit organization but extend the reach and services of the public organization, the U.S. Department of Defense, to its employees and their families.

Why should adult educators care about these issues of networked governance, boundary spanning, community engagement and the Department of Defense? Adult education researchers and practitioners are needed to improve each of these components. As social services continue to be privatized and delivered through a community network of providers (Van Slyke, 2003), the delivery of adult education may grow more fragmented across numerous public and private organizations which may not appreciate and nurture the profession. Effective boundary spanners and boundary spanning behaviors advances the professional alliances encouraged by Wilson (2002) in “link[ing] our adult education expertise with the numerous other professional and occupational endeavors that depend significant on adult education practices but typically do not see themselves as ‘doing’ education” (p. 79). Additionally, as an emerging theory, adult educators have important roles as boundary spanners in bringing the learner-centered educational concepts of reflection, power and improvement (Wise & Glowacki-Dudka, 2003) to fields such as health, human resources, extension, faith-based communities and other professions (Wilson, 2002).

Boundary Spanning Roles of Communities & Organizations: Adult Educators Understanding Volunteers as Boundary Spanners

Jenny W. Jordan

The United States of America was founded on the principles of social and civic engagement (Vettern, Hall, & Schmidt, 2009). This principle is clearly recognized in our national commitment to volunteerism. The U.S. Department of Labor Statistics (2012) reports that 64.3 million youth and adults over the age of

sixteen volunteered through or for an organization at least once in 2011. Volunteer efforts represent 8.1 billion hours of service with an economic value of more than \$173 billion (National & Community Service, 2012). The contributions volunteers make to society are significant, necessary and beneficial for the community and the volunteer.

From the days of pilgrims venturing into unknown lands to form partnerships and alliances to today's volunteer that connects a local community with organizations, volunteers have been connectors, bridging the divide between communities and organizations. Volunteering promotes "reciprocity, community, social solidarity and citizenship" (Merrill, 2006, p. 12). These attributes parallel the roles of boundary spanners. Scott (1992) describes boundary spanning as "the bridge between an organization and its exchange partners (p. 196). Boundary spanning is further described by Weerts and Sandmann (2010) as activities that transition from a one-way dissemination paradigm to a two way constructive model.

Volunteers connect the community to the organization. As members of communities, volunteers have the knowledge of the people, places, and resources of the community itself. These volunteers, serving central roles in spanning boundaries, process information from the environments of the community and the organization and provide representation to both groups of stakeholders. In an open system with autonomy from the organization, volunteers engage stakeholders, negotiate power dynamics, communicate expectations and build connections (Fariar, 2010) all while serving the needs of both the community and the organization.

The Weerts and Sandmann (2010) model of boundary spanning divides boundary spanning into two domains of task orientation and social closeness. Roles fall across two axes: 1) the continuum of technical & practical tasks to socio-emotional or leadership tasks and 2) the continuum of connection to the organization and connection to the community. In considering the volunteer in the community, the value of volunteering extends beyond the basic act of the service of the individual to the community to the creation and building of a more democratic, productive and social community (Merrill, 2006) and could be described in terms of boundary spanner roles and behaviors.

Both boundary spanners and volunteers have contacts within both the community and organization that are varied and numerous (Miller, 2008). These contacts enable the boundary spanner and the organization to generate social capital and increase partnerships that create a more diverse perspective in planning, implementing and evaluating efforts. (Driscoll, 1995). With knowledge of communities and organizations, volunteers who are successful as boundary spanners are effective at not only collecting information but sharing it with the appropriate partners. Not only is the boundary spanner knowledgeable, but can also find knowledge and make those who most need it within the relationship aware. (Miller, 2008).

In general, volunteers serving boundary spanning roles exhibit strong interpersonal skills which aid in building trust across boundaries and connections within. Sarason and Lorentz (1998) noted that boundary spanners have "a combination of cognitive and personal-social characteristics that not everyone possesses" (p. 96). Furthermore, interpersonal skills are instrumental in a boundary spanners ability to connect diverse, resourceful and unique partners (Miller, 2008).

Goldring and Sims (2005) describe the boundary spanners as participating in "a sophisticated dance between those in organizational power in each of the partner organizations and those who only had informal power within these same institutions" (p. 234). Volunteers in boundary spanning roles know, respect and believe in the rituals and cultures of the people and the organizations (McLaren, 1986). Because they are "of the neighborhood," the boundary spanner respects and believes in the neighborhood

and the neighborhood in return respects and believes in the boundary spanner (Miller, 2008). As adult educators supporting volunteers and the organizations they work in, it is imperative that we consider where adults we are leading are, what their needs may be, and the roles they play. In successful transformation of learning, this understanding is imperative for adults to be successful and to learn in varying situations. In better understanding the roles and, hence, the challenges and success of boundary spanning, the learning experience may be richer, stronger and more effective.

Conclusion

As higher education institutions transition from the one-way dissemination paradigm of outreach to a two-way engagement model, more entities are involved in the areas of boundary spanners. As adult educators, boundary spanners are in our classrooms, our communities, our scholarship and our practice. As indicated in these three reflections, boundary spanners can play distinct roles in communities as volunteer, as contractors, and as partners. As educators, it is our role to better equip those working with boundary spanners and the spanners themselves in the task at hand.

Boundary spanners are about educating groups across boundaries. Whether these groups are higher education and communities, contractors and agencies or volunteers in a local organization incorporated with a national organization, the understanding of group dynamics, roles, and expectations are important. This understanding often comes through education, sometimes called training and falls squarely in the lens of adult education.

Due to space constraints, references are not presented here, they are available on request.