Examining the Boundary-Spanning Behaviors of Community-Based Adult EducatorsAn Empirical Examination

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Abstract: Community-based adult educators span multiple boundaries, balancing needs of learners, groups, organizations, and institutions. This study contributes not only to the theoretical framework of boundary spanning, but also supports the practice of these adult educators in negotiating a challenging environment.

The public sector's use of networked governance reflects a similar orientation of adult education organizations and institutions using partnerships, collaborations and community engagement to accomplish their missions (Cooper, 2003; Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). Unique individuals at the nexus of these organizations and institutions serve as boundary spanners in these partnerships (Ring & Van De Ven, 1994).

The study's significance contributes to the theoretical understanding of boundary spanners within community engagement and networked governance. By advancing the scholarship of community-located adult educators, we will better comprehend the challenges these educators face. This includes a challenging environment while negotiating organizational policies and missions with demonstrated community needs in an ever increasingly networked world. Studying these phenomena will illuminate the specificity and complexity of these contemporary roles.

Relevant Literature

The theoretical framework builds on a model from Weerts and Sandmann (2010). In their framework, two axes create four quadrants of types of boundary spanners in higher education community engagement activities. The two axes, task orientation and social closeness, include four constructs of technical-practical, socio-emotional and community focused and institutionally focused. The Weerts and Sandmann model is based on interorganizational relationships based on open systems theory and the emerging trans-disciplinary literature of boundary spanning (Marchington & Vincent, 2004; Marchington, Vincent & Cooke, 2005; Williams, 2002, 2013).

Interorganizational Relationships

Before understanding boundary spanners, one must have a foundation in how these individuals complete their work through interorganizational relationships. The field of interorganizational relationships is broad and includes several disciplines. Adult education is often delivered through interorganizational relationships with multiple individuals, groups, and organizations collaborating to serve their appropriate audiences (Wise & Glowacki-Dudka, 2003). Individuals creating organizations give up some control in an effort to move towards collective action. When they do so, these institutions exert some power and control over those who created them and interact with them. In the past few decades, more organizations are specializing in their roles and activities and partnering with other specialized organizations. This creates a form of networked governance.

Networked governance typically is applied to the movement of governments moving away from direct provision of services towards using multiple organizations to solve complex issues and challenges (Cooper, 2003; Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). Networked governance assumes that one entity cannot solve all the complex issues of society. The growth of networked governance in the public sphere has spurred interest in relational contracting, or contracts based on reciprocity between organizations (Marchington & Vincent, 2004). Both public and private organizations use these relational contracts. The contracts may be implicit or explicit. When studying networked governance, scholars in public administration primarily focus on the network itself (Cooper, 2003; Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). Research is limited on the individuals who grease the wheels of relational contracts. These individuals are boundary spanners.

Boundary Spanning

Boundary spanners are individuals that engage in important activities between, among, across, and within organizations and communities. Boundary spanning emerges from socio-technical theory and open systems theory (Jordan, Adams & Mull, 2013). Four themes of boundary-spanning activities include: communicator, protector, innovator and relationship managers.

As communicators, boundary spanners aid in knowledge diffusion (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). Because boundary spanners often act at the periphery of an organization, they must not only absorb knowledge from the environment surrounding them, but also must transmit information to the environmental context. Tushman's (1977) three boundary communication roles are: gatekeepers, organizational liaisons, and laboratory liaisons. Each is a boundary spanner, but focuses on varied boundaries. Gatekeepers focus on external entities to the organization. Organizational liaisons engage with multiple sub-units within an organization. And laboratory liaisons communicate within an organizational sub-unit, primarily communicating task oriented activities.

As protectors, boundary spanning individuals buffer an organization from environmental uncertainty and influences. Two primary mechanisms exist to provide this protection. Organizations can augment or insert internal administration to protect the organization from the environment. The introduction of new data processing employees to manage healthcare environmental changes due to the Affordable Care Act brought Fennell and Alexander's (1987) example of internal administration to fruition. Organizations also can augment peripheral structures such as adding a dedicated sub-unit to engage with the environment, community engagement offices in higher education institutions for example.

Because boundary spanners constantly interact with external entities and information sources, they encourage risk taking, experimentation, and entrepreneurship to address complex problems (Williams, 2002). This bridging function equips boundary spanners to be innovators within their organizations, weaving new knowledge with existing information.

Finally, boundary spanners are power managers. These individuals often determine what information is shared, hidden, or forgotten. Thus, boundary spanners must build trust not only with their external exchange partners but also with their internal managers and peers. A strong understanding of the organization allows a boundary spanner to float between and among the power structures of external organizations and maintain flexibility and entrepreneurship within their own organization.

Boundary spanners have been studied in diverse fields. While a segment of boundary spanning research emerged from management and organizational theory (Marchington & Vincent, 2004; Noble & Jones, 2006), several recent scholars have introduced boundary

spanning to the fields of public health (Waring, Currie, Crompton, & Bishop, 2013; Williams, 2011) and education (Miller, 2008; Tarant, 2004; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Weerts and Sandmann (2010) introduced task orientation and social closeness as the two constructs creating four types of boundary spanners within university community engagement. Their qualitative study offered a model needed for additional testing and measurement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate these important boundary spanning behaviors of individuals serving as adult educators in a networked governance model. Specifically, this study examined the boundary spanning behaviors prevalent in the population of community located adult educators working between the higher education and military communities and the personal and work/organizational characteristics in the population that individually and jointly influence the boundary spanning activities. Three research questions guided the study:
1) What specific boundary-spanning behaviors are prevalent in a population of community-based adult educators?
2) To what extent are boundary-spanning behaviors explained *individually* by personal or work/organizational characteristics in a population of community-based adult educators?
3) To what extent are boundary-spanning behaviors explained *jointly* by personal or work/organizational characteristics in a population of community-based adult educators?

Research Design

A tertiary goal of the study included determining how the Weerts and Sandmann model could be applied to other contexts. Therefore, a selected-response questionnaire was created involving 32 boundary spanning behaviors segmented into four construct orientations. The process by which the boundary spanning constructs and subsequent items were created is detailed by Sandmann, Jordan, Mull and Valentine (2014). The four boundary spanning constructs are technical-practical orientation, socio-emotional orientation, community orientation, and organizational orientation.

Population

The study population included a specific group of community-located adult educators. Through several higher education partnerships with the U.S. Department of Defense, the military funds projects and activities, primarily through the Cooperative Extension System, intended to bring land-grant university resources in the areas of spousal employment, family and consumer sciences and youth development to military civilian staff members and military family members. The individuals assigned to these projects are community focused, often solely community located, faculty and staff members of numerous higher education institutions. This population provided a focused examination, but is also large enough to give a broad perspective for rigor, reliability, and validity.

Data Collection

The data collection strategy followed Dillman's (2009) tailored design method. Data collection occurred through an email request to publicly available listserves of community-located adult educators working with military audiences. These individuals encompassed the initial pool and were contacted two additional times with reminders. They were also requested to forward the email request to others they knew in their network. This resulted in a modified

snowball sample. This process resulted in 237 surveys from 149 unique links. Of the completed questionnaires, 178 were deemed usable.

Data Analysis

After preparing the data, which included standardizing responses and creating appropriate scales, the data was entered into SPSS. Each of the construct scales approximated a normal curve. The coefficient alpha for each construct scale was calculated for reliability. The means of analyses, by research question, included rank ordering the 32 boundary spanning behaviors and grouped by construct, a series of bivariate analyses to determine the separate predictive power, and a series of multivariate analyses to determine the combined predictive power.

Findings, Conclusions, and Discussion

The study found that the boundary spanning behaviors had high means and these community-based adult educators focused on technical-practical and socio-emotional items. Of the top nine highest ranked practices, technical-practical behaviors and socio-emotional behaviors were seven of the nine. Interestingly, no items from the community orientation were in the top nine. No items from the technical-practical orientation were in the lowest ranking ten behaviors. Second, only one personal characteristic, educational attainment, individually influenced the boundary spanning behaviors. There were, however, numerous work and organizational characteristics which individually influenced the boundary spanning behaviors. Third, the models that best jointly influenced boundary spanning behaviors included communication with the community and support for work with the community.

As a result of this research, several conclusions are offered. First, community-based adult educators use communications as the most important tool in their skillset and ability to bring multiple individuals, groups and organizations together.   Some scholars define boundary spanning as communications (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981) while others see communications as a tool to accomplish boundary-spanning activities in a global, collaborative society (Ernst & Chrobat-Mason, 2011).   This study offered that communications is a predictor of boundary spanning activities and also a tool.

Second, within this specific population, the work and organizational characteristics play a greater role in encouraging boundary-spanning behaviors than personal characteristics. This contradicts previous findings that community-based adult educators are successful because they come from the community (Miller 2008; Weerts, 2005). Armed with this information, adult educators within organizations can respond and create an environment to support better boundary spanning behaviors. Adult educators can also advocate within their respective organizations to create an environment which supports and nurtures boundary-spanning behaviors.

Third, these community-based adult educators focus on technical-practical tasks and were less likely to assume a community orientation. Logically, community-based adult educators would use many technical-practical tasks in accomplishing their work. But what makes this significant is what behaviors are not as fully used. Socio-emotional tasks were not among the most used behaviors and no community oriented behaviors were in the top nine behaviors. Additional information is needed regarding why these community-based adult educators do not utilize as many socio-emotional behaviors in completing their boundary spanning work. The socio-emotional behaviors include those related to conflict and power, a significant topic, particularly when planning programs for adults (Cervero & Wilson, 2005). A community-based adult educator cannot remove their connection from their employing organization, but a strength

of being placed in the community is having a strong community connection that was not as evident in this research.

      This research contributes to the call by Wise and Glowacki-Dudka (2003) in examining boundary spanners' roles in bringing learner-centered educational concepts of reflection, power, and improvement to diverse fields. Boundary spanners and this research contribute in two ways to the field of adult education. Adult educators co-located and embedded within numerous community spheres accomplish the adult education work taking place. But embedding adult educators as subject matter experts in other disciplines, groups, and organizations can strengthen the field and profession of adult education. This intentional embedding will strengthen learning among individuals in knowledge diffusion as Wise and Glowacki-Dudka (2003) assert.

      Social services continue to be privatized (Van Slyke, 2003). These social services include individuals serving as community-based adult educators. The delivery of adult education can become more fragmented without effective and efficient boundary spanners to deliver, connect, and serve information across numerous boundaries between and among our organizations and institutions. These boundary spanners are an ideal mechanism to bridge our institutions, our communities, our associations, and our people.

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