The Open University

Working in boundary practices: Identity development and learning in partnerships for inclusive education (Sections: 3.3–3.6, pp. 19–29.)

In this paper there are two acronyms:

UITE – This stands for Urban Initiative for Teacher Education, a project involving 3 schools and a University in the United States.

CHAT – This stands for Cultural Historical Activity Theory, an approach that explores the socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts of partnerships; allowing researchers to focus on rules, divisions of labour, and the tools that orient participants towards objects or outcomes.

3.3 Boundary Practices

From a CHAT perspective, school-university partnerships can be understood as the overlap of two activity systems. This overlap occurs in a *boundary practice* which is a practice in which two communities (e.g., a university program and an elementary school) engage and that has "become established and provides an ongoing forum for mutual engagement" (Wenger, 1998, p. 114). In the case of the UITE, for instance, site professors visited teacher residents once a week to provide feedback and in-classroom support. These encounters could be understood as a boundary practice since the activity systems of teacher preparation programs and the activity system of schools overlapped. Furthermore, the university and school communities both drew from the same tool set and later, the data from these visits, for improving classroom practice. And yet, the unit of analysis was different. For the university, the focus was on the teacher skill set; for the school, the resulting impact on student performance. Of course, both teacher and student performance interact, react, and produce change.

In particular, this boundary practice can be seen as the opening of a periphery, in which site professors were offered a legitimate access to the practice (e.g., classroom teaching) without subjecting them to the demands of full membership (e.g., being responsive for teaching or complying with school and district policies). Peripheries, no matter how narrow, reflect continuity, an overlap in connection, and a meeting place offered to outsiders and insiders (Wenger, 1998). As Wenger (1998) pointed out, this can extend observation and involve actual forms of engagement, as it was the case for teacher-trainers or professors who not only observed but also provided feedback to teachers. From this perspective, "the periphery is a very fertile area for change because it is partially outside and in contact with other views and also partially inside so disruptions are likely to occurred" (Wenger, 1998, p. 118).

Indeed, tensions are ubiquitous in boundary practices. CHAT provides a set of useful analytical tools to understand these tensions. Consider the kind of tensions that may emerge when teacher educators and school administrators look for different kinds of performance indicators in the classroom or code teacher and student performance differently. Meaning making requires scaffolded practice in which mistakes as well as successes improve understanding, generalization, and fluency. Yet, where test performance is the single measure of learning, mistakes may be seen as failures rather than opportunities to learn. Teachers may be reluctant to allow observers to view imperfect performance and, in doing so, blunt important aspects of student learning. Teacher educators and school administrators may view these teaching episodes differently creating tension for the teacher resident. In UITE, we frequently encountered concerns from our teacher residents. They wanted to try new techniques but if they did and were visited during a session where they were learning to use a new approach, their observers would comment, critique, and suggest dropping the new skill. For instance a site professor stated:

> You have school site people, administration coming through, and writing it up as an evaluation. They're like, "If we're trying something new for the class, that's not what we want to be evaluated on," but here come the evaluation forms. There was a real struggle between the site professors, you know on the university side and the school side going and trying to gently remind them, "You promised not to evaluate them when coteaching." (Interview with Margot, site professor, May 24, 2010)

Engeström (1987) referred to this kind of tension as *secondary contradiction*. That is, when new elements enter from outside an established activity (e.g., teacher residents' lesson in the classroom) creating contradictions between the elements of the activity system. In this case, co-teaching practices were introduced as a part of the master's program, creating conflict with the districts' teacher evaluation procedures. Site professors would handle these kinds of concerns weekly. On the

other hand, opportunities for expansive learning exist within these tensions, if teacher educators and school administrators are able to take the time to review, explore and uncover hidden assumptions in their coaching. In the UITE, a compromise was reached.

3.4 Boundary Brokers

Suchman (1994) used the term *boundary crossing* to describe social actors (e.g., site professors and teacher residents) that enter unfamiliar territories in which they may not be fully qualified and in which they need to negotiate the tools of the overlapping communities in boundary practice. These actors have been called in previous studies boundary crossers or boundary workers (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Here we refer to them as boundary brokers since, in a boundary practice such as the visit of teacher-trainers or site professors to teachers' classrooms, these subjects become *brokers* of their communities' understandings and tools. Because boundary brokers work at the heart of discontinuities, they deserve a close examination. Analyses of brokers' work can assist in opening windows into the work that occurs in boundary practice (Akkerman & Bakker, 2010), providing a robust understanding of how partnering institutions engage (or not) in expansive learning.

The key role of the broker is to create connections between the practices of the overlapping communities and to facilitate the transactions between them by introducing elements of one practice to another (Wenger, 1998). As Wenger pointed out,

> The work of brokers is complex and it involves translation, coordination, and alignment between perspectives. It also requires the ability to link practices by facilitating transactions between them, and to cause learning by introducing into a practice an element of another. (Wenger, 1998, p. 109)

In the UITE, site coordinators, principals, clinical teachers, and site professors were boundary crossers- both in theory and practice. In this paper, however, we focus on the role of site professors as boundary brokers as they crossed and came to practice in a different setting (e.g., schools); they

visit teachers in their classroom to provide professional development, for instance, aim to link what teachers learn in their classes or workshops with teachers' actual practices. Site professors may introduce concepts or practices to the teachers and help them to translate that concept or practice to the particular context of the teachers' classroom. The work of the site professors in the UITE, thus, was key in that they aimed to translate, coordinate, and align tools associated with inclusive education such as co-teaching, cultural responsiveness, and differentiated instruction with teacher residents' daily instructional practices.

The experiences of boundary brokers illustrate the ambiguity and tensions of boundaries. For instance, Williams, Corbin, and McNamara (2007) pointed out how this ambiguous role can lead to conflicted narratives. These authors described how teachers in their role as school numeracy coordinators felt a conflict between collegial and accountability discourses that positioned them as colleagues but also supervisors. Similarly, in the UITE, site professors encountered discontinuities and challenges when negotiating cultural tools from both institutions. Site professors, for instance, struggled with their outsider role. This outsider position was an obstacle in mediating teachers' implementation of the tools introduced in the masters' program. Marlene, a site professor at the UITE working in Coppermine Elementary, commented on her discussion with a teacher resident about a special education student in his classroom who was disengaged and unsupported during a reading activity: "I was really gentle. I was really gentle with that because what I don't want to do is criticize" (Interview, November 30th, 2010). The site professor was trying to mediate the teacher's implementation of differentiated instruction to provide access for a special education student to the general education curriculum. Yet, she was a new site professor who did not want to be regarded as coming into classrooms to criticize. As an alternative, she raised the issue with the teacher and then she went and modeled how to work with the student herself. Marlene saw herself as someone who was trying to make teachers aware: "I like to think I am helping the teachers become aware or help

talk to the teachers about, you know, 'Are you making sure—how I can help you to make sure that everybody's accessing the curriculum?" (Interview, November 30th, 2010)

This idea of being someone who raised awareness was a resource that she used to negotiate her position from the periphery in the schools. She did not want to be seen as a critic, but as someone who raised awareness. She saw her role as a broker as one who brings awareness. By bringing awareness, she attempted to insert differentiating instruction as a tool into teacher residents' practices without creating conflict that would impact her acceptance as part of the school community.

Boundary brokers (e.g., site professors) experience the risk of being marginalized in a community, as they are thought to be part of another community, but they are also valued as they bring new and innovative perspectives. Research on boundary crossing, for instance, consistently suggested that boundary-crossing individuals (e.g., site professors) run the risk of not being accepted (e.g., Edwards, Lunt, & Stamou, 2010). Edwards et al. (2010) demonstrated how welfare managers who were in charge of coordinating the work of multiple agencies that partnered to improve the social inclusion of disadvantaged youth in England were not completely afforded full membership in any of the participating communities. On the other hand, Jones (2010) found in a historical analysis of boundary-crossing architects that architects with a background in a different field were valued for their creative role in challenging established professional practices. In our own work in the UITE, we found that site professors were also valued for the funds of knowledge that they brought to the classroom. As Debbie, a teacher resident at Zuni Elementary, mentioned: "I like having them [site professors] come in because I feel like I'm going to get positive constructive feedback" (Interview, March 12th). Using analytical tools from boundary practices and activity theory affords the opportunity to examine and understand how insiders that work in boundary practices negotiate their position and identity amidst the ambiguities they face.

One way to examine how insiders resolve the ambiguities of boundary practice is to provide insight in what Landa (2008) called *personal fortitude* or Walker and Nocon (2007) called "boundary-crossing competence," which is the "ability to manage and integrate multiple, divergent discourses and practices across social boundaries" (p. 181). Similarly, Fortuin and Bush (2010) stressed the importance of boundary skill. This skill includes the capacity to have dialogues with the actors of different communities and also to have inner dialogues between the different perspectives they are able to take on (Akkerman, Admiraal, Simons, & Niessen, 2006). Fisher and Atkinson-Grosjean (2002), for instance, demonstrated how managers in industry were required to translate research results into existent commercial applications. To accomplish this, managers needed to be skillful in using and translating tools and finding a balance in the ambiguity of boundaries. Marlene efforts should be understood in light of this previous research. In the UITE, the site professors' boundary crossing competence (Walker & Nocon, 2007) repertoire included their own biography and their own developing understandings of the tools that they brokered (e.g., differentiated instruction and cultural responsiveness). Urma, the site professor at Zuni Elementary, commented during an interview.

> I think my understanding [of cultural responsiveness] has changed, almost every week. I feel like I have a new definition of what it is. Part of that comes from just the way I was trained as a coach in my district, coming into this program… because, I think, when I started, at the beginning of the semester, I was focusing on what is being done in the classroom, I guess those more technical aspects. I have really—I mean, this is been a learning process for me. (Interview, December 22, 2010)

In this quote, Urma acknowledged that her understanding of cultural responsiveness was developing and changing. She stated that, at the beginning, she drew from her experience as a coach in her school, which had similar demographics to the UITE schools, to focus more on the technical issues

of this tool. As she engaged with the work at the UITE, she noticed that being culturally responsive demanded teachers to go beyond technical aspects. Urma's understandings of the cultural tool (i.e., cultural responsiveness) she was introducing changed over time, and therefore her work as a broker changed as well when helping teacher residents to understand and implement this tool. She also drew from her background as a coach in her school, which was a resource for her to negotiate her role in boundary practice.

Yet, the resources used by insiders are never used in a vacuum. The larger challenge for boundary workers is to exercise their competence in culturally and politically charged contexts. As we mentioned earlier in this paper, the schools were fraught with their own issues of accountability and curriculum policies, which created challenges for site professors and teacher residents. For instance teacher residents complained about the challenges of being asked to comply with the curriculum and assessment policies of the schools, while simultaneously practicing what they were learning in the masters' programs. Debbie mentioned:

> I think more than anything it's my school stuff and wondering am I meeting my criteria for that and trying the new co-teaching… I sometimes feel like they're not looking at the co-teaching aspect, they're looking at your reading block. Are you doing what you're supposed to be doing during reading block? (Interview, March 12th)

On the one hand, teacher residents were asked to be master's students and act accordingly. On the other, they were asked to be teachers who complied with their school district's reading policies. Looking at the work of people working partnerships from this prism, allows for the exploration of how boundary workers use their resources in culturally and politically charged contexts to become certain kinds of people (e.g., certain kinds of teachers).

3.5 Fluid Identities in Boundary Work

Learning and identity development are closely interrelated. As boundary workers participate in boundary practices, they are always becoming someone else (Lave, 1996). In this regard, Holland et al. (1998) advanced the concept of *heuristic development*. Heuristic development is the process in which individuals (e.g., teacher residents) reform themselves through the appropriation and reformulation of cultural tools (e.g., co-teaching, differentiated instruction, cultural responsiveness, understandings about inclusion, etc.) that have been created by past generations (Holland, et al., 1998). It is through heuristic development that "culture and subject position are joined in the production of cultural resources that are then subjectively taken up" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 18). The process of heuristic development does not mean that teacher residents, for instance, are free to transform the cultural resources as they please. Teachers' and site professors' identities are "the sediment from past experiences upon which improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject positions afforded one in the present" (p.18). The appropriation of cultural tools becomes for teacher residents and site professors the basis of becoming certain kinds of teachers – the basis for their identity development – as these cultural resources are taken up by teacher residents and site professors to position themselves and signal that they are certain kinds of identities. Teachers' and site professors' identity, thus, develop through and around cultural tools, which are identified and associated with certain communities (e.g., an elementary school), places (e.g., classroom) and activities (e.g., a lesson in the classroom). There is a "codevelopment of people cultural forms and social positions in particular historical worlds" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 33) and a codevelopment of identities among the people working in boundary practices.

Through heuristic development, for instance, site professors and teachers appropriate tools that have been historically attached for struggles for inclusive education. In the UITE, teachers needed to appropriate tools associated with inclusive education (e.g., co-teaching, cultural

responsiveness, differentiated instruction) introduced by site professors. The appropriation of these tools was mediated by the elements of the activity system in which teachers worked every day (e.g., a lesson in the classroom), including the policies regulating both communities of practice (i.e., school and university). For instance, the appropriation of a cultural tool such as differentiated instruction was mediated by the assessment and reading policies operating in the school (i.e., rules of the activity system of a lesson in the classroom). Teachers differentiated instruction by segregating students into ability profiles according to their school districts' classification framework for reading performance. By differentiating instruction in this way teacher residents were able to signal that they were both a student at the masters' program and a full-time teacher at their schools. They were able, thus, to resolve the identity demands of working in boundary practice. From a CHAT perspective, this was the resolution of a *secondary contradiction* (Engeström, 1987). Teacher residents, thus, experience identity development through the resolutions of tensions created in boundary practices in which the tools introduced by the masters' program (e.g., differentiated instruction) overlapped with assessment and reading policies operating in the school.

The concept of heuristic development provides analytical tools to understand the identity projects in which boundary brokers engage in boundary practices. Using this prism, one can examine the ways these actors appropriate and change cultural tools that have been associated to the inclusive education movement. In doing so, they co-participate in the historical trajectories of those tools and are able to become certain kinds of professionals. From our projects and the examples

3.6 The Role of Boundary Objects in Partnership Work

Boundary objects are mediating tools that are shared across communities of practice (e.g., university and schools) and that shape the work done in partnerships (Star & Griesemer, 1989). They can be material such as a lesson plan or ideal such as the concept of inclusive education. Boundary objects themselves help to maintain the existence of boundaries. Boundary objects are

flexible enough to adapt to different situated activities (e.g., a thesis seminar or a lesson about suffixes) while also maintaining a recognizable structure (Star, 2010; Star & Griesemer, 1989) to enable the coordination of goals (even when they were disparate) and actions of the actors involved in the partnership.

In our work in the UITE, an important boundary object was the development and use of PBAs that required the development of explicit planning document like interventions plans for students that served both as official documents of the school site in terms of service delivery to students as well as evidence of exemplary practice for progress towards graduation in the teacher education program. In terms of understanding and mapping pedagogies, the lesson plan included in these PBAs served as a critical artifact for reflection and refinement for the master's degree. For the school, it served as an accountability measure to determine whether the teacher was meeting critical pathway dates for covering the curriculum in preparation for state assessments. Norma, a teacher resident at Coppermine Elementary, told us:

> At least that's what we're supposed to be doing [lesson plans] and that's what grade level does. We'll sit there together with all of our manuals out and we'll type in our objectives and our lessons and email it and everybody has the same thing. It doesn't always look the same in every classroom but we plan it together. (Interview, March 12th)

Thus, the boundary object, in this case lesson plans, has a similar structure for each organization in the partnership such as objectives and activities, but the individual institutions regulate and shape behavior in very different ways because of the function and role of the boundary object itself.

Boundary objects also serve to make the boundaries pliable and allow for transportability back and forth across the boundaries (e.g., Finlay, 2007; Lutters & Akkerman, 2007; Star & Griesemer, 1989). Boundary objects also serve as coordination tools that allow work done on each side of the boundary to modulate learning and understanding (Star & Griesemer, 1989). For

instance, as teacher residents, site professors, and site liaisons worked together the definitions for inclusive education began to expand from a focus on disability to a focus on difference and more importantly, to the notion of voice and identity. The principal at Coppermine Elementary stated:

> It's hard to kind of let those outside cultural influences in, especially when you feel like you have so much to get done and you can't deviate and you can't—but giving the kid some voice and letting them have some ownership of the classroom, I would say that's part of being inclusive. (Interview, June 4th)

As Star and Griesemer (1989) explained, boundary objects are subject to situated translations. This flexibility allowed members from both institutions to engage with inclusive education and its tools while they continued to work on how to accomplish inclusive practice while continuing the work the partnership even at novice and, sometimes, superficial levels. Lutters and Akkerman (2007) found that the malleable nature of boundary objects reflected situated realities that varied across objects and relationships among group members. For instance, both residents and faculties worked in politically and culturally charged institutions. Without sufficient background information about a concept like inclusive education including its inception, history, and purpose implementation could become so distorted that it might lose its structure and principles while the label remained. Thus, mediation and interpretation of boundary objects is not static. Some researchers have suggested that how boundary objects are interpreted and used can vary across time, people, and activities, sometimes facilitating communication and collaboration and other times erasing their boundary features (Barrett & Oborn, 2010; Pennington, 2010).