Workplace Learning through Collaboration: A Case Study

Devarati Syam

Abstract: This paper is based on a case study that investigated a community based partnership project. The goal of the partnership was to holistically address the health, safety and wellness issues of teen girls in an alternative school. An action inquiry group comprising of the project partners representing the five different agencies was created to identify progress and challenges of the project implementation in order to problem solve jointly. This paper based on a dissertation research reports some of the key findings from the study to describe how collaboration was conceptualized in this setting and the implications for adult learning. The paper also discusses the implications for practice based on the study findings.

Introduction

Community based partnership efforts have generally been recognized as one of the key strategies to deal with the myriad issues facing the urban neighborhoods based on the idea that no single entity/organization seems adequately equipped to deal with these complex environments (Ravella & Thompson, 2001, Lasker & Weiss, 2003Bazzoli et al., 2003). Adult education practitioners are often placed in these community settings to facilitate partnership processes which make it important to understand this space of interagency work. While many studies have been conducted to document the successes and failures of partnership projects, (Roussos & Fawcett, 2000, Baum, 2002), this particular study attempted to analyze the perspectives and micro-interactions of the partners and extend the understanding of partnership processes to the field of Adult Education. There is relatively little work done in this area of interagency work from a perspective of an adult education practitioner.

The Study

Study Setting: This case study focused on documenting the story of one community based partnership project that brought several organizations together to create a school based intervention for teen girls in a Midwestern city. The physical setting for this study was an alternative school for “at-risk teens” which was run as a partnership school with a Neighborhood Center. The partnership was made up of eleven individuals representing five different organizations: i) the Neighborhood Center that housed the school and was the physical location of the study; ii) a non-profit agency that programmed for teen girls; iii) a local agency that programmed for parents; iv) a public university represented by the School of Continuing Education and the School of Nursing; and v) the Medical School in the city. The representatives of these organizations came together as a group of partners to implement a social program for girls in this school with the focus of creating a “community-based partnership model for holistically addressing the health, safety and wellness issues facing low-income, high-risk middle school girls.”
**Research Questions:** The overall objective of this study was to investigate partnership processes and gain insight into how adults participating in such an effort constructed their experience of participating in it and learned through this engagement. One of the primary objectives of the partnership was to create a collaborative model. In this paper, I will report some of the themes that emerged related to how partners engaged with the partnering work and the kind of learning demonstrated through this process.

**Literature Review:** The literature has no common definition of partnership or collaboration (Huxham, 1996). For the purposes of this study, the two terms are used interchangeably. They can be understood to mean groups of people working as a temporary collective towards some common goals by creating a collective space through which they negotiate, learn, and work jointly. This was the working definition for the study. The paper reports the issues centered on organizational barriers in partnership spaces and tensions between organizational and partnership work that are especially well discussed in the literature on educational partnerships (Sirotnik and Goodland, 1988, Miller & Hafner, 2008). Partnerships designed at the interface of two or more organizations bring out differences that are inevitable when professionals step out of their separate institutional cultures and try to work together. Slater’s (1996) use of organizational habitus is a useful tool to understand why collaboration is notoriously difficult to build. Habitus, she explains (borrowing from Bourdieau), can be thought of as deeply ingrained behavioral norms specific to each organization. As a member of the organization, we unconsciously comply with those norms in a prescribed environment. Collaboration and interagency work essentially requires one to step outside of one’s own organizational habitus, which can only arise out of a genuine understanding of this habitus and furthermore, to step into someone else’s shoes.

**Study methodology:** This research study is based on a qualitative design employing a case study method (Stake, 1998). Data for the study was gathered through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with the partners and review of all program documents. The researcher was also one of the partners at the partners’ table. All eleven partners were interviewed and more than a dozen partners’ meetings were observed as part of the study. The interview and group meeting notes were transcribed and analyzed as narratives. The qualitative analysis was based on analyzing the data into meaningful units and patterns, both descriptive and explanatory. The data were coded and reviewed for analytical relationships among the different themes and categories as they emerged from the coded data (Bogden & Biklen, 2006, Creswell, 2006).

**Study Findings:** One of the major themes that emerged from the data analysis involved negotiating the boundaries between organizational practices and partnership work. The partners representing different organizations came to the table wearing an organizational hat that was a given and sometimes in direct conflict with the partnership tasks at hand. Partners raised the issue of boundaries and borders in working within the partnership that conjured up spatial images of walls of organizations. These walls represented guidelines and rules for the employees but also their roles in protecting organizational practices. The idea of making walls permeable emphasizes that collaboration could be achieved only by partners defying and/or overstepping their organizational focus. The conflicts arising out of these two positions were centered on many issues ranging from sharing organizational data with different partners, sharing the role of the program coordinator to serve the needs of the partnership which was beyond the organizational mission of one of the partnering agencies, agreeing on what constituted the correct approach to parent programming, and others. The conflict of organizational position and
partnership position spilled over in how the partners framed their work as well as how they talked in the meetings that constituted their partnership experience.

For the most part, the partners’ table articulated collaboration through a spatial metaphor. In framing the partnership work, one of the partners explained:

The idea and one of the goals was to make a model of collaboration emerge out of this partnership - I don't think it was ever clear what that model would be. The idea was the partners would come together and start working with the girls and families. The de-facto model, the metaphor I have used is cohabitation, that a group of partners come together to work with these girls, they could come in and share the same space in the school. And essentially offer their services as if they are a single stand-alone agency and do a fine job as they have always done. That would be in my mind the de facto model. To be able to come together you have to figure out how to coordinate your services, how to make their boundaries permeable and to share some responsibilities outside their own boundaries and learn how to share a common space.

These words described succinctly how the partners viewed the act of collaboration.

For a multi-agency collaboration, the idea of creating a space for partnership by permeating through organizational boundaries is not a new one (Agranoff, 2006, Gilchrist, 2006). In the use of a spatial metaphor, there is an assumption that the partnership work would take the partners away from their stand-alone organizational tasks. It also meant that the level of collaboration would be indicated in the way that re-definition could be achieved. Three of the partners (Nursing Center, the Program Co-ordinator from the non-profit who worked with the girls on a goal setting curriculum and the School) had a clear overlap because all three entities worked with the girls directly and coordinating their services was the key to securing an “overlap” space. One of the ways, the partners projected working together to coordinate the services was by undertaking a case review format of individual girls by the program coordinator, the nurses and the teachers. It happened sporadically and informally. The partnership was not able to create a structure that would allow this to happen consistently. One of the partner’s inability to share data for institutional reasons was a further roadblock to the individual review of information for girls. No matter what was the specific example of inability to create overlap, the underlying script of collaboration could not be disengaged from the institutional resistance that was encountered in creating collaboration. This represents a paradox in the heart of interagency work.

The case study documented that the partnership encountered organizational *habitus* in many ways: the sharing of data, differences in our approach to parental engagement as well as differences in the sharing of program coordinator. Every agency had a set way of doing things which for the most part was hard to overcome. The partners’ table was able to resolve some conflicts arising out of the opposing pulls of organizational and partnership roles like in the case of coordinating the calendar of the program coordinator with the school calendar but not on more deeply grained issues like data sharing or how a partnering organization viewed parental engagement.

*Learning through collaboration*
Since this partnership project was framed as a collaborative action research project, it was able to create a “learning table” and name many of the lapses in the project implementation. This “learning table” projected a certain understanding of learning required in the partnership space. A large part of the success and challenges of the partnership can be seen as how each partner operationalized the meaning of their roles creatively and intentionally. The extent to which each of the partners was able to cross organizational boundaries was a measure of their learning and responsiveness to an evolving set of tasks that emerged from the unfolding of the partnership. Many of the partnership tasks could not be anticipated ahead of time, like dealing with staff turnover or writing of different applications to Institutional Review Boards of three institutions, reframing the partnership focus based on the needs in the school. Therefore, partners had to engage with continuous redefinition of their own work based on these emergent needs. The tasks could not be predetermined through the contractual language of compliance, which often becomes the basis of partnership work. Rather, a partner’s role had to be re-invented on an ongoing basis in the face of each task and each decision – this level of engagement could only happen through the long term commitment of partners.

The significant learning of partnering work is inextricably tied to partners’ perceptions about tasks that are required of partnership work. There was a difference between partners who understood their task and role as their organizational role and how it was originally envisaged in the proposal and others who were more likely to experiment and step out of this original conception of tasks. The first group was less responsive to the emergent needs of the partnership tasks that required them to rethink their own roles. Going back to the same example of parent programming mentioned earlier, it was clear the partnership struggled to implement the parenting component of the program. Every partner acknowledged the challenge of doing this work but not all partners were able to embrace this difficulty and refocus their energy to engage with the parenting component at the partners’ table. These partners felt that it was the agency responsible for the parenting program to be the entity solely in charge with this component of the program. Other partners stepped to the plate and problem solved with the parenting organization to see how this programming stream with the parents can be strengthened.

Therefore, to the extent each of the partners was able to re-define their work; they were able to demonstrate a shift and an indication of some kind of learning in the context of the partnership. The same difference between partners was mirrored in ways they talked about their engagement. Some partners defined their work narrowly to reflect their organizational mission while others recognized the need to try out new things. Everyone knew that it is hard to change all the things that teens faced in these highly complex environments but if they did not try, nothing would change. Partners who understood that their domain of practice as complex where there was no one model that worked with predictable results, were also the ones who kept trying out new ideas and approaches. Some of the partners evoked the language of complexity and non-linear relationships between cause and effect to ground their understanding of partnering work (Snowden and Boone, 2007).

Discussion and Conclusion

If creation of overlap space is a core metaphor for interagency work, the ensuing learning through collaboration can be conceptualized as a boundary crossing practice, in this case crossing organizational boundaries. In this case study, collaboration was conceptualized as creation of overlap space between agencies, the learning required to create and sustain this space.
is one that requires stepping outside of one’s narrowly defined organizational role. Slater (1996) states that trust and dialogue are the only way to break down these organizational walls and this partnership demonstrated rudimentary growth in this respect. However, the kind of time investment that is required to change organizational habitus needs sustained implementation. The piecemeal funding that creates these small local partnerships is really not ideal for fostering partnership work (Baum, 2000) and in addressing issues of organizational habitus. This partnership lasted for three years and had only minimal impact on organizational change although this study cannot predict how the learning from this partnership will translate into working in future partnerships for each of the organizations that have been part of this endeavor.

While stepping outside of organizational habitus is not always possible, the implication for practice is to look for a way to balance this fundamental tension between organizational and partnership role in all interagency work. The learning embodied in collaboration is to undertake this boundary spanning practice in a situated and contextual way. In this case study, partners who were able to do so either overtly or covertly demonstrated greater responsiveness to the partnership needs as opposed to others who were more loyal to their organizational focus.

Sarason and Lorentz (1997) discuss the notion of coordination as a particular kind of work that cannot be boxed into any job descriptions and skill sets that provide the basis of organizational charts. Their frame, without explicitly challenging any of the better known stage theories or models of partnerships in the literature (Peterson, 1991; Hogue, 1993; Bailey and Koney, 2001); does pose an alternate to boxing collaboration as a set of activities or skills that can be neatly tied into a bounded activity. Instead, they think of collaboration as a kind of “boundary crossing” based on a redefinition of resources. They use the metaphor of boundary crossing to denote a set of skills that is required within and between organizations to focus on building lasting networks with a shared commitment that go beyond organizational roles and responsibilities and in effect defy individual job descriptions within the organization. In that respect, coordination work is cast as a form of community building. This frame for understanding collaboration as essentially a community building effort through creating networks of relationships take us beyond the discourse of organizational roles and responsibilities and a functionalist thinking about it. Instead, it calls for a more comprehensive view of the nature of this engagement as a kind of organizing in contrast to the stage theories of partnership processes.

References


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Devarati Syam
Researcher, Center for Urban Community Development
School of Continuing Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
161 W. Wisconsin Ave., Ste. 6000
Milwaukee, WI-53203
Email: devasyam@uwm.edu

Presented at the Midwest Research-to Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, Michigan State University, September 26-28, 2010.