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Riding the Bus: Symbol and Vehicle for Boundary Spanning

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Abstract

In this reflective essay I examine the activity of a bus tour, organized as the result of an ongoing university and city partnership. I illustrate how riding the bus is not only symbolic for positionality in our society, but also how it can be a viable mechanism for initiating boundary spanning and promoting opportunities for place-based learning and future engagement. I focus on the concept of boundary spanning and the roles and domains most often associated with this activity by exploring the language and metaphors invoked in the term. Then by framing the notion of boundary spanning as an activity system, I consider how riding the bus facilitates less traditional participants' engagement. I conclude by proposing that the activity of riding the bus can inform the boundary-spanning metaphor while also serving as a mechanism to mobilize further engagement efforts.

Introduction

As I boarded the once yellow but now brightly decorated old bus, I suddenly realized that despite my many years in the United States, not to mention an uncountable number of bus rides across an array of countries, contexts, and climates, I had never actually ridden a school bus. I was entering domains uncharted, spanning a new boundary, yet all the while building on common ground at both the individual and institutional levels *(Friedman & Podolny, 1992)*.

Often in our daily lives we face new challenges, cross into new contexts, and span new boundaries in order to access and connect to new knowledge, practices, or communities. However, the way in which we define and participate in boundary spanning varies considerably from one context to another. As an academic and an administrator, as well as a first-generation immigrant to this country, I have done my fair share of boundary spanning across disciplines, across multicultural and multilingual communities, and across diverse geographies. In each instance, access and participation in each new setting involved a gradual process of learning and adaptation. There is an extensive body of research, particularly in human development, that seeks to account for how people engage with and participate in new communities and that posits a care-

fully structured process at play, a form of "peripheral participation" *(Lave & Wenger, 1991)*, which, not surprisingly, is highly contingent upon observation and a gradual immersion into the given community. As universities seek to bolster engagement as a method for teaching, learning, scholarship, and service with faculty, students, and communities, we are sometimes hard pressed to develop processes that allow for forms of peripheral participation, observation, or exploration. Frequently we turn to experienced boundary spanners, executive leadership, senior colleagues, and others known for proven connections or a trusted position to identify sites and communities for engagement. As a result, we may unintentionally overlook or leave unexplored certain sites or communities simply on the grounds that they are unknown to us.

In this reflective essay, I examine the simple activity of a bus tour and illustrate how at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) in Greeley, Colorado, this has become a viable mechanism for initiating boundary spanning and for promoting opportunities for future engagement. I begin by briefly considering the everyday practice and symbolism of riding the bus, and then I reflect on the concept of boundary spanning and the roles and domains most often associated with this activity, before exploring the language and metaphors evoked by the term. Next I illustrate the notion of boundary spanning as an activity system and consider how riding the bus facilitates less traditional participants' engagement. Specifically, I describe how riding the bus acts as a vehicle to engage faculty and students in a transformative process of place-based learning, which produces a kind of "nexus effect" that manages boundaries, forges common ground, and enables discovery of new frontiers *(Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011)* by connecting participants to the local city, government, and communities. I conclude with reflections on ways in which riding the bus affords new perspectives and ways of knowing, symbolic and literal, with regard to boundary spanning.

Riding the Bus: Making the Familiar Strange

Riding the bus is an almost universal communal activity in many parts of the world, from large metropolises to remote rural villages; often it serves as the only means of collective transportation. Within the U.S. context, riding the bus also evokes powerful sociohistorical associations: Rosa Parks, the Freedom Riders, and the American Civil Rights Movement. Riding the bus, and one's right to a seat on the bus, in essence constitute both a public vehicle and a sociopolitical symbol that represents individual positionality,

crossing borders, challenging boundaries, and upholding basic human rights. Since the notion of positionality involves "multiple, unique experiences that situate each of us in relation to each other" *(Takacs, 2002, p. 175)*, riding the bus offers a distinctive yet recognizable shared space that allows participants to collectively explore less familiar spaces. In this essay, riding the bus serves as a qualitative lens through which to reflect upon how institutions and communities can initiate engagement efforts with each other; further, as a situated activity it delivers potential for more formal engagement initiatives. Riding the bus builds on the familiar to explore the unknown, literally repositioning individuals and encouraging distinctive ways of thinking and being in our communities.

Back on the old school bus I sat down next to a young woman, a junior in a class of undergraduate education students who, together with the professor, were taking a tour of our local city. The professor had participated in a faculty bus tour earlier in the year and as a result was so inspired that she worked with the university Office of Engagement, in partnership with the city, to organize a similar event for her undergraduate course for preservice teachers. As the windows on the bus fogged up, we wiped them down to look out at passing neighborhoods, the schools and businesses, points of interest, and housing areas that all border the university. About four blocks from campus, the city tour guide drew our attention to the oldest house in town: a four-room adobe building that had belonged to Nathan Meeker, founder of the Union Colony who met his death at the hands of Native Americans. Like many of her peers, the young student sitting next to me was unaware of this unusual house and its history.

The bus tour, originally titled "From Study Hall to City Hall" and more recently "Greeley Unexpected," is just one component of ongoing collaborations between our university and the local city government. These collaborations grew out of and include other initiatives, such as the Town-Gown and University District partnerships. Over the past several years UNC and the local city have actively partnered on various interconnected projects that bring together local teachers, lawyers, business partners, and faculty who, having recognized that the institutional identity is closely related to the city's, are partnering to address priority actions, including growth and development through education initiatives and neighborhood design projects. The city bus tours are one specific activity that has emerged and involves individuals and groups from across campus, mostly using the city's public transportation system. When I initially learned, through my participation in our Town-Gown and

in my previous role overseeing faculty professional development, that the city had offered a bus tour to incoming hall directors and resident assistants, the idea occurred to offer a similar tour to new faculty. Unlike a tourist sightseeing tour, the city tour is designed to build authentic connections with the local community where one lives and works, to connect faculty to one another and to identify opportunities for community-based learning. Unperturbed by the potential logistical difficulties and encouraged by an amazing city manager, we set forth to plan the first faculty bus tour, including a welcome tea hosted by a local bed and breakfast. Almost 40 new and returning professors participated in the tour, which required two city buses.

Given the size and location of our town, most faculty drive and own a car, so for some colleagues the tour was the first time riding the city's public transport. Even those who had lived and worked in town for many years were impressed with this form of exploration and new learning about parts of the area that were unfamiliar to them. As a resident for almost 8 years, I nonetheless found that some of the seemingly familiar parts of town appeared newly distinct from aboard the bus; in fact, the city took on quite a different complexion. It is through my ongoing professional participation, experiences, and learning in these bus tours that I reflect upon not only how the seemingly simple activity of riding the bus can be an effective vehicle for mobilizing new forms of boundary spanning, but also how the activity can serve as a symbol for further understanding boundary spanning, especially with faculty and students.

The Concept and Language of Boundary Spanning

Traditional definitions of boundary spanning as a conceptual framework underscore the sharing of new knowledge and information from institutions of higher education to stakeholders beyond the institution, and boundary spanning is often referred to as a form of "building bridges from campus to community" *(Weerts & Sandmann, 2010)*. More recently, and with increasing emphasis on engagement as a "two-way street," boundary spanning has been reframed with regard to community partners and their roles as "spanners" in this activity *(Adams & Sandmann, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Miller, 2008)*. Both approaches have yielded fluid and dynamic models of community and institutional boundary spanners with regard to particular domains of activity, emphasizing technical or socioemotional tasks and potential intersections among them, as well as the defining traits or characteristics of those institutional

leaders or community figures engaging in boundary spanning. In both institutional and community models of boundary spanning, the individuals and domains identified in most instances concern positions of leadership, authority, and power. Institutional champions tend to be presidents, provosts, or deans and directors; similarly, community advocates are often known leaders or board members. Boundary spanners' roles are essentially to connect others, support capacity building, and develop partnerships. In many ways, they can be considered spanners of spanners, in that they build the connections for others to engage. Implied in this concept is the idea that even those who do not occupy such leadership positions—the students, the faculty, and the community members in general—must eventually span boundaries if they too are to become engaged.

Like much academic discourse and language in general, the term "boundary spanning" is by definition a metaphor, a symbol intended to capture a necessary concept and tangible practices fundamental to engagement. By their nature, the metaphors we live by provide a means to "experience and understand one kind of thing in terms of another" *(Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5)*. Metaphors establish a reference point, often one associated with spatial, temporal, or personal images. Boundary spanning as an image allows us to conceptualize and analyze the unique ways in which individuals, institutions, and communities reach out and interact with one another around mutually beneficial goals and issues. All conceptual metaphors shape the human thought process, because metaphorical concepts highlight or draw attention to some aspects and hide or obscure others. Boundary spanning is no exception; it evokes an image that connects and provides coherence to a larger system of spatial meanings prevalent in the discourse of education, organizational leadership, and other arenas that emphasize varying landscapes, pipelines or pathways, and trajectories or journeys in which we move through or across loosely or tightly defined spaces and boundaries. Examples of such language might include the ever-changing educational landscape, the academic pipeline, or students' career pathways, to name a few. Where boundary spanning is concerned, we understand the metaphor by reference not only to a body of scholarly research and literature, but also because of our lived experiences, our movement and travel into and out of spaces, our associations of crossing boundaries, borders, or bridges either on foot or by another means of transportation. In fact, the very notion of boundaries is an integral part of our spatial and

mental mapping because it is how as physical beings we tend to situate ourselves in the world:

> Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation. We project our own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces. . . . Even where there is no natural physical boundary that can be viewed as defining a container, we impose boundaries—marking off territory so that it has an inside and a bounding surface—whether a wall, a fence, or an abstract line or plane. *(Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 29)*

By reflecting on the activity of riding a bus as a vehicle for undertaking boundary spanning, it is possible to examine the interactive and multilayered nature of this process, contemplating the literal and metaphorical journey, as well as the opportunities to discover new frontiers. In the following sections, I frame the discussion of the bus tours with reference to the scholarship of engagement, boundary spanning, and sociocultural theories of human activity and development.

Boundary Spanning as an Activity System

By definition the scholarship of engagement *(Boyer, 1996)* is concurrently an invitation and an appeal for faculty and universities to revisit their origins and missions, to rediscover institutional connections with local and global communities, and to reframe scholarly work in and for the public good. Boyer's holistic approach pushes the boundaries of intellectual activity beyond the mere creation of new knowledge, or the scholarship of discovery, and instead emphasizes the interconnections of the scholarships of teaching, integration, and application as engagement, thus serving as a constant reminder of the interrelated nature of the work we conduct. Expanding upon Boyer's work, others have emphasized the need to increase community and partners' roles and voices in the process of engagement from the beginning of any collaborative partnership through to the dissemination of findings or new knowledge *(Ramaley, 2000; Rice, 2005; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011)*. Consequently, engagement as a term shifts conceptually from unidirectional notions of outreach and service to the idea of a two-way street, promoting a coconstructed relationship, emphasizing mutual benefits and reciprocity. However, notwithstanding these shared assumptions, there remains an absence of "ordinary

language" *(Oiumette, 2014)* in the ways in which we conceptualize, construct, and disseminate the scholarship of engagement. In an effort to promote shared understandings and invoke ordinary language, I propose that the activity of riding the bus can inform and expand the boundary-spanning metaphor as a construct and can serve also as a mechanism to mobilize further engagement efforts. Riding the bus in these contexts is a distinguishable, yet familiar, exploratory activity that offers participants (students, faculty, and others) a means to span new boundaries in a supportive mode. Accordingly, the bus constitutes a neutral space, creating common ground, transporting participants as passengers to less familiar or unknown areas, and facilitating a journey across new boundaries.

Boundary spanning, as mentioned, evokes images of building bridges and of deliberate actions undertaken to sustain connections and relationships between entities. Nevertheless, and where university–community partnerships are concerned, "boundary-spanning behaviors are shaped by a number of complex social, cultural, and political factors" *(Weerts & Sandmann, 2010, p. 706)*. These include cognitive know-how or awareness toward the task at hand and varying degrees of social alignment. In the bus tour instance, task orientation is facilitated by "knowing how to ride a bus": that is, understanding how to sit and behave on the bus. Similarly, social alignment is aided by an "understanding of why you are riding the bus and where you going": appreciation of basic roles and responsibilities of driver, passengers, and others and basic knowledge of the purpose of the tour. Additionally, boundary spanning when framed as a behavior or human activity is inevitably dynamic, often linked to leadership roles, simultaneously laden with both promises and tensions; it is intricately networked with other activity systems working toward specific ends. Accordingly, and drawing on activity theory (Engeström, 1999; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999), boundary spanning can be conceived of as goal-directed activity, composed of a series of actions directed toward a particular object.

Activity theory emphasizes the notion that all human activity is mediated by tools or artifacts, which are always socioculturally and historically situated and can be material or symbolic. Language is an example of a symbolic tool, and pens, computers, or other writing instruments are examples of material tools. Each tool, and how it is used in any given activity, influences the physical endeavor and the mental representations of the activity *(Wertsch, 1998)*. For example, reading a book is not the same as watching a movie because each is a distinct activity, evoking different cognitive representations and responses. When conceptualizing

riding the bus as a form of boundary spanning, the activity can be mapped out according to the basic principles of activity theory, as shown in Figure 1. Individual actors undertake an activity, in this instance broadly conceived of as boundary spanning by riding the bus, which is oriented or directed toward a particular goal, such as learning about a community. On one level, a range of sociocultural tools and artifacts mediate the activity, including the bus, maps, and language. On another level, a series of underlying components—rules, community, and a division of labor—structure the activity. The outcome of any activity will vary, depending on the participants. In the case of riding the bus, outcomes include a raised awareness, shifts in perspectives, and new knowledge or understanding about a given community.

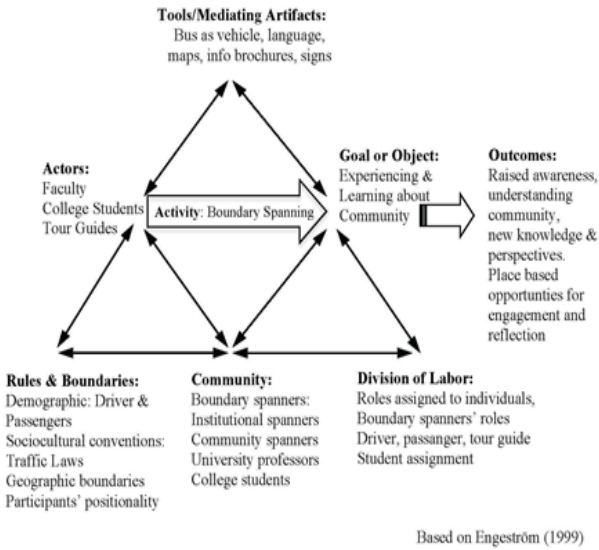

Figure 1. Conceptualizing boundary as an activity system

Riding the Bus as Symbol and Method

Undoubtedly, how we manage and engage in boundary spanning as an activity on both institutional and individual levels, and the ultimate success of these endeavors, is also contingent upon "a new understanding of vertical, horizontal, stakeholder, demographic, and geographic boundaries" *(Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011, p. xii)*. With these considerations in mind, I analyze how riding the bus extends the metaphors of boundary spanning and as a vehicle serves to mobilize boundary spanning, and ultimately promote engagement. For students and faculty, riding the bus afforded dif-

ferent types of boundary spanning and outcomes, and involved varying degrees of task orientation, positionality, and social closeness.

Vertical boundaries are perhaps some of the most established boundaries to overcome, and they reference how individuals within an institution or a social context are pigeonholed or organized by levels and ranks, often reflected in the physical location, spacing, and work ethic in buildings and organizations. For boundary spanners the challenge is to break free of the hierarchy and embrace collaboration. Expanding on the bus activity and its symbolism, the vertical boundaries exist in the traffic laws, the roads that a bus travels and that connect a campus to a community, and the rules or norms for riding the bus. When individuals came together aboard the bus, they entered a common space defined by new rules and positionality. While they retained their unique identities as professors and students, they also assumed a shared identity as passengers. As an audience listening to the commentary and description of the tour, they became participants in an exchange of information about the city, sharing with one another personal facts or knowledge acquired through other courses or experiences. Additionally, as participant passengers they reached new understandings that resulted from experiencing the journey, the routes taken, and, in several instances, the need for the bus driver to follow local traffic laws. One illustrative example is that when approaching railroad tracks, which happened several times in the journey, the driver stopped the bus and opened the doors despite the bitter cold exterior temperature. The guide explained that this act was both performed in remembrance and required by a state law imposed after a tragic accident in which over 30 children lost their lives when an oncoming train that the driver failed to hear hit their school bus. In this regard, being on the bus, stopping at the railroad tracks, and experiencing this very place-based activity combined to provide participants with "a meaningful entry point to the topic, and one that increases the topic's prominence" within the context of a local community *(Cocciolo & Rabina, 2013, p. 99).*

Riding the bus is a means to overcome and reconsider horizontal boundaries, which typically refer to not just the walls that separate and divide units or groups, but also to the organizational and management structures and the division of labor that can support or hinder cross-group collaboration and partnerships. Aboard the bus these boundaries are simultaneously the physical build and stability of the bus (rickety old school bus or executive tour bus) and the journey and roads that the bus travels as organized and

planned in the city tour. The bus tours described here were developed through the city planning department and in consultation with different individuals from the university. They were planned and intended to be reciprocal and mutually beneficial. For the city, this meant the opportunity to showcase and engage passengers in a tour of traditional sectors in the local community, its sociocultural history, and the commerce and leisure offerings, with a view to raising awareness and inviting collaboration. For the university, this was a method to provide faculty and students with new connections and exploration of the city, as well as to promote thinking about engaged scholarship and community-based learning opportunities connected to varying disciplines and scholarly interests. Moreover, riding the bus afforded participants, faculty and students, literally new views of the city, new learning and discovery of parts previously unknown. On each tour individuals commented that, despite already living in the city, they had learned new facts, gained a different perspective, visited unknown locations, or simply connected to someone new.

Riding the bus enabled innovative forms of boundary spanning with regard to stakeholder boundaries, or those that concern issues of access and communication between the city and the institution, and between individuals. Stakeholder values are sometimes considered the "doors and windows," and they ultimately reference a value chain that is communicated between constituents. The organization and planning of the bus tour required university administrators to consult with the city manager and the local transport system. City employees hosted the tours on a pro bono basis, recognizing the value of engaging with UNC faculty and campus along with the potential for partnership building, new internships, and collaborative research that might result. Access to and use of the bus was negotiated through the city and the local transport system in accordance with the Federal Transit Administration and the charter rule, whereby local public transport systems subsidized with federal monies can provide up to 80 hours at no cost to government agencies and low-income groups. The university, through the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning and the Office of Engagement, coordinated publicity and registration and collaborated with the city to finalize planning and other logistics.

Additionally, riding the bus literally spans new demographic and geographic boundaries. Demographic boundaries concern the identity spaces that exist between diverse groups of individuals who engage with one another in any given context and potentially exist across "the entire range of human diversity from gender and

race to education and ideology" *(Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011, p. 28).* Although geographic boundaries concern primarily the location and interrelations or constraints of individuals and groups working regionally, nationally, and globally, they also include the physical and virtual mediums and the boundaries entailed by new technologies, cellular phones, the Internet, and computers. When riding the bus, demographic boundaries are inherent in the passengers, in the driver, in the tour guide, and in other visual images or representations viewed during the experience. However, it is the journey the passengers undertake together on the bus through the city across geographic and community boundaries, ranging from low-income largely industrial areas to wealthy residential neighborhoods and leisure parks, that promotes a reframing of both individual and collective identities. The city of Greeley, founded on traditions of agriculture and farming, has a long, rich history of immigrant settlers, from European colonists at the turn of the last century to Latino field workers and laborers, and more recently an influx of East African and Burmese refugees who relocated to work in the meat packing and cheese factories. These recent demographic changes have brought with them sociocultural changes in schools, in workplaces, and in the community as a whole. The bus tour crosses historical, social, and demographic boundaries and provides insights into the rich multicultural fabric and diversity that make up this area. For one student, riding the bus through one of the low-income largely immigrant neighborhoods was a poignant reminder of her own childhood, growing up poor. It inspired her to think about the kinds of students she would have in her future classroom and to consider how she might engage them in mapping activities and self-reflection.

Boundary Spanning: Moving Beyond the Comfort Zone

As the old school bus pulled back into the campus parking lot, the students gathered their belongings and prepared to get off. The professor reminded them she would be following up with questions and reflections about the experience. I could already hear students' enthusiasm. One young woman turned to me and explained how she had been on campus for over 3 years, but rarely had the need or occasion to leave. Yet on this day, in this one bus ride, she had seen and learned more about the city than she had in all her time here. The bus ride had given her insight and reason to explore more new areas and engage with the community in the future.

Riding the bus, for faculty and students alike, has proven a productive and worthwhile experience at our institution. The bus ride is a vehicle that facilitates participants' reflection on their formal roles and their relationship to the external communities beyond campus. In other words, riding the bus promotes opportunities for reimagining one's connection to and possibilities within a community; it promotes a structured form of boundary spanning that, as one student commented, transported her out of the regular comfort zones. Thus from a conceptual standpoint, the bus tour repositioned the participants as novice spanners, and from an experiential standpoint it bolstered the degree of social closeness and alignment among participants by enabling them to share the ride together. In so doing, it fostered meaningful connections with the communities in which they live, study, or work. By traveling through neighborhoods and communities, students not only came to see other people's positions but were also able to reflect on their own positionality. In subsequent responses and feedback, another student described how because of the bus tour, she was seriously thinking about staying in town over the summer to get more involved. Riding the bus revealed the local city as a meaningful place, investing it with new value and human understanding *(Harrison & Dourish, cited in Cocciolo & Rabina, 2013)*.

As a visual symbol, riding the bus connects to and extends the language of boundary spanning, evoking the activity as a journey and as a vehicle providing a tangible method in which it can be undertaken. Traditionally, boundary spanning has been framed mainly with reference to leaders and those in positions of power. In juxtaposition, riding the bus provides a basically public and shared means by which novices and less experienced others can begin to span boundaries. Ultimately it is the undertaking of the journey—riding the bus, not the bus itself—that defines the engagement. As institutions seek to endorse engagement as a scholarly method of teaching, learning, and scholarship, let us not lose sight of the ordinary; it is time to offer everyone a seat on the bus.

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