Navigating the Thresholds and Crossing Boundaries Into Academic Leadership

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Collaboration | Reflection | Professional Learning | Leadership | Transformation | Identification | Coordination

This study examines our (three teacher educators) learning through navigating thresholds and crossing boundaries as academic leaders. When boundaries between different professional roles are crossed, new in-between spaces of practice are created that provide rich personal and professional learning. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) identify four mechanisms for learning in boundary crossings; 'identification', 'coordination', 'reflection' and 'transformation'. This collaborative self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) draws on online conversations and reflections with the findings framed through the four mechanisms. First, leadership roles required a different identification or 'presence and presentation'. Clothing choices were a visible delineation of our former and current roles and how we were becoming more strategic as academic leaders. Second, we sought opportunities for coordination in that we asked people (whom we recognized as effective leaders) for conversations about our professional and personal struggles. Navigating boundaries requires acknowledging the appropriate voice and delivering the appropriate message at meetings and represents a form of transformation. There is a strong alignment between 'reflection' and the S-STEP methodology as both involve learning about one's own and others' practices. Understanding these aspects does not ensure success but increases the likelihood of positive outcomes. We have come to understand that boundaries are permeable and we can choose to traverse them with greater confidence because we have acquired a growing repertoire of strategies. Collaborative S-STEP has served as a powerful tool to navigate these boundaries.

Introduction

Universities are dynamic institutions currently under pressure to readjust their strategies due to the rising influence of technology and globalization, competition for tuition dollars, the pace of change in the economy (Gonaim, 2016; Ransdell et al., 2018), and the Covid-19 pandemic (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Consequently, leaders in higher education face dynamic, complex, and challenging demands. Many institutions are dealing with perceived administrative bloat, and faculty frequently feel that resources are misaligned with institutional goals. In this paper, we take a reflective look at the process of transitioning into leadership roles from that of educator/faculty to offer different perspectives on the neoliberal corporate governance models that guide so many institutions of higher education.

We examine our growth and responses to the challenge of the transitionary period into leadership roles, and present our learning as we crossed boundaries as academic leaders. We view boundaries and thresholds similarly; they are spaces where the rules are ambiguous and there is uncertainty (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Berry, 2020). We are three physical

education teacher educators (PETE), across different continents who (like Allison and Ramirez (2020)) viewed an administrative role, including managerial and leadership aspects, as a way to help shape and support our field more broadly. After 13-19 years as teacher educators, we took on the leadership roles of the department chair, associate head of school, and associate dean for research, respectively. S-STEP research is guided by a 'desire to be more, to improve, to better understand' (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014, p. 7), and this collaborative S-STEP provided us with the opportunity to pause and reflect using insights from across organizational and geographical boundaries.

Moving from teacher educator to academic leader represents a significant shift (Allison & Ramirez, 2020). Leaders can no longer be aligned with a single specialized faculty group and are instead responsible for interacting with a wider faculty constituency. There is also a personal growth process that must take place as leaders come to understand themselves and their developing identities (White, 2014). Little is known, however, about how academic administrators "ultimately reconcile their often conflicting identities as faculty members and as administrative leaders" (Del Favero, 2006, p. 278). Teacher education administrative leaders experiencing this type of transition receive little if any, formal preparation in assuming administrative roles. Studies examining teacher educator identity development are on the rise, however, only a handful of studies of teacher educators who have taken on leadership roles have been reported (e.g., Clift, 2015; Kitchen, 2016; Loughran, 2015; North et al., 2021). These authors provided accounts that often describe the demands, and accentuate the highs and lows associated with being a leader. Further compounding this transition is a lack of clarity regarding role expectations, the uncertainty about outcomes of one's performance, and blurred boundaries with the faculty (Jackson & Gmelch, 2003).

Loughran (2015) described how his identity as a teacher educator shaped his actions as a Dean, concluding that his transition to leadership was unpredictable, dynamic, and changeable. Also examining the shift from teacher educator to academic leader, Clift (2015) identified a number of lessons including the importance of managing one's own time, the public nature of the position which is often shaped by others' expectations of the role, and found that self-study can be useful in developing academic leadership skills and actions. Clift also raises several important questions, including what challenges do teacher educators face during induction to their new leadership role? and what facilitates their transition from teacher educators to leaders? These questions continue to be relevant (Allison & Ramirez, 2020; MacPhail, 2017).

The concept of boundary crossing is a useful concept with which to explore role transitions. Williams & Berry (2016) utilized boundary crossings as a theoretical and analytical framework, identifying a boundary-related critical incident or experience that occurred during their work as teacher educators in international contexts. Working in these boundary spaces involved learning how to negotiate new kinds of relationships with colleagues and students, manage changed roles and responsibilities and, ultimately, a search for a renewed sense of self, as each sought to understand themselves differently within a new professional context. Similarly, we embarked on a collaborative S-STEP to help better navigate the boundaries and crossing thresholds into new situations and experiences. Faculty teaching and administrative roles presented a series of boundary crossings from what we knew and were familiar with, to what we encountered in the new social, cultural, and educational contexts of academic leadership.

Mechanisms and processes of learning in boundary spaces have been identified by Akkerman and Bakker (2011), who argued that when boundaries between different professional roles are crossed, new in-between spaces of practice are created that provide potential for rich personal and professional learning. Within S-STEP research, Hamilton et al. (2020) suggest that threshold crossing enriches personal understandings of practice and raises new possibilities and perspectives. According to Akkerman and Bakker (2011) the term 'boundary' does not necessarily involve a physical or geographic border, but may involve "a sociocultural difference leading to discontinuity in action or interaction. Boundaries simultaneously suggest a sameness and continuity in the sense that within discontinuity two or more sites are relevant to one another in a particular way" (p. 133). They define learning broadly, as involving "new understandings, identity development, change of practices and institutional development" (p. 142) and assert that all learning involves the crossing of boundaries of one sort or another, whether it is from one learning community to another or one distinct role to another. Boundary crossing, therefore, involves identity work, and "a key question is the distinction between what is part of me versus what is not (yet) part of me" (p. 132).

Akkerman and Bakker (2011) discovered four main learning mechanisms, and all are relevant when examining a boundary crossing; 'identification', 'coordination', 'transformation', and 'reflection'. Within each mechanism, particular processes either support or constrain the learning of participants in these boundary spaces. The first mechanism is *identification* where boundary crossing leads to the identification of the intersecting practices and common purposes, including the opportunity to redefine practices in light of newly discovered ones derived from studying and crossing boundaries. For example, how the professional clothing of PETEs differs from academic leaders and resistance to dressing more formally similar to other academic leaders may reduce effectiveness in high-stakes meetings. This example is also salient to the second kind of boundary-related learning: *Coordination*, which requires a "communicative connection" (p. 143) or dialogue that attempts to overcome the inherent nebulousness in boundary spaces. It also involved opportunities to better orchestrate and harmonize once-separate policies and practices (Lawson, 2016). *Transformation* occurs when engaging with ideas or issues results in changes in practices, resulting in "a new construction of identity that informs future practice" (p. 146). Finally, *reflection* involves learning to look differently at one practice by taking on the perspective of other people and their practices. For example, a teacher educator may view challenges and opportunities dramatically differently than a chair or dean, and vice versa. This type of work has the potential to facilitate boundary-related reflections that bring about new awareness and facilitate reform (Lawson, 2016). Importantly, these mechanisms and processes are not intended as discrete, sequential, or hierarchical. Boundary spaces inherently hold tensions and create challenges and opportunities. As a consequence, people working in these spaces "enact the boundary by addressing and articulating meanings and perspectives of various intersecting worlds" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, pp. 141–142).

Aim

We used self-study to examine our growth as leaders and our responses to the challenges of boundary crossing in academic leadership; more specifically, the mechanisms and processes by which we crossed these boundaries.

Methodology

Collaborative self-study of teacher education practices (Ritter et al., 2018) guided the research design. This process enabled us to consider the ways we each experienced new learning and practice around leadership as PETE faculty, and came to gain insights into teacher educators' experiences of leadership roles. S-STEP research is improvement-aimed, interactive, and includes multiple, mainly qualitative methods (LaBoskey, 2004). This research was: improvement-aimed because we sought to better understand the mechanisms and processes of becoming leaders; interactive through our collaboration; and used multiple qualitative data sources (online conversations, reflections, and responses to reflections). We demonstrated trustworthiness by collaboratively and critically examining our growth as leaders and how we crossed boundaries, relating back to the literature, and making our analysis transparent (Mena & Russell, 2017).

Data Sources

This collaborative self-study group has been in existence for almost four years. We meet at regular intervals usually about once a month with a focused agenda. As each of us lives on a different continent, all of our self-study work has occurred online. The third anniversary of our collaboration prompted us to reflect on our practice throughout this time and to examine if we had come to understand our practice more fully, if we felt we had improved as leaders, and if our leadership values had changed. We each reviewed the transcribed conversations we had completed together over the previous year (n=8). Following this 'taking stock' we each wrote a meta-reflection using the prompts: Do we hold true to our original leadership values? What implications of how and what we did as leaders during this time? Each of us then commented on the meta-reflection of the others. Two further discussions ensued, a month apart, where we discussed these reflections. Each of us had an opportunity to share our thoughts and the other two collaborators had an opportunity to question, probe, advise, or empathise. The style was conversational throughout. These reflections with comments (n=3) and transcribed discussions using the transcription feature within Zoom (n=10) comprised the data analyzed for this paper.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was utilized to guide us in systematically and robustly exploring, interpreting, and reporting a pattern-based analysis. Initially, we became familiar with the data by making notes on

observations and insights in each individual piece of data and the overall data set as we read through them. After multiple reviews of the data, we inductively coded through the lens of mechanisms and processes used to cross boundaries; identification; coordination; reflection; and transformation. Using these as themes we began to develop broader patterns of meaning for each, which we refined and agreed upon with the intended outcome of the process to create the key aspects of the themes in the raw data, and which are assessed to be the most important given the research objectives (Thomas, 2003). Trustworthiness was addressed through consistency checks whereby we each checked the theme descriptions against the text and came to an agreement. It is also evident in the open and transparent acknowledgment of contexts and the existence of self in tension through "managing competing selves" (Farrant, 2019, p.75). Finally, appropriate quotes were selected to weave together the analytic narrative and data extracts and contextualising the analysis in relation to existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Findings

Findings are presented as the four mechanisms with examples drawn from our S-STEP to unpack each mechanism in our context of crossing thresholds between PETE and academic leadership.

Identification

Leadership roles required a different 'presence and presentation' from our former selves. This presence reflects that different power exists in leadership and that there are rules to how it can best be brought to bear to get the results we desire. How we identified ourselves became particularly visible in our clothing choices. PETE requires educators to participate and demonstrate in movement contexts and our clothing choices reflected the practical nature of our work: "the first eight years of my career I was in PETE, I would wear active clothes" (Kevin). Clothing also signalled the nature of our work and became an important part of our identities as Chris noted "As an outdoor educator I needed to wear practical clothing for those types of activities. I wore them as a badge of honor." The transition to leadership required a different identity and at times our clothing choices created dissonance: "I hardly slept Monday night because I was looking back at the Zoom meeting and I'm in a hoodie…should have dressed up" (Maura). In a similar vein, Kevin commented:

> *when I have a meeting with the President or the provost or someone else I think dress is incredibly important if I'm wearing my T shirt that conveys a message…I have a jacket in my office that I put on for meetings such as that that also conveys a certain level of professionalism and, in some way, I want to change people's minds and their perceptions of what we do.*

Here Kevin's comment indicates that we felt the active clothing used in PETE sometimes undermined the status of our PETE work. Clothing choices are a tangible and visible delineation of our former and current roles and how we chose to cross this threshold by becoming more strategic as academic leaders.

Coordination

To navigate how best to cross thresholds, we sought out people within our institutions who could help us with the boundary spaces between PETE and leadership. Kevin noted: "I have another...chair that I respect on campus … though she doesn't know the personnel in my department, she understands the institutional history and she understands how things work on campus. So, she's a really good sounding board." The benefits of these exchanges were that we felt less isolated in our struggles in this space. Maura had a similar experience when talking to a colleague in leadership and from another institution: "We chatted with each other for about an hour and it was funny we both are having the same issues both having the same problems. And I was so relieved. ...I should have done this earlier." Maura indicates that the benefits of coordination and connecting with others go beyond the practical and strategic to providing emotional solace because many challenges are shared.

We also learned that it is best to seek these connections early, particularly in the online context, as the incidental conversations, meeting introductions, and networking opportunities that we would normally have on campus have not existed for the previous 24 months due to Covid-19. We each experienced a personal vulnerability in seeking and making these connections. It was a little like crossing a threshold and not knowing whether we would be welcome on

the other side or indeed whether a return was possible. Interestingly, it seemed that the permeability of boundaries increased the more we crossed them as we gained confidence.

Transformation

A central part of the (at times turbulent) process of navigating boundaries in leadership is acknowledging the appropriate voice and delivering the appropriate message at both formal and informal meetings. This can mean working at the intersection of institutional expectations, faculty demands, and ideals of quality learning. We have come to learn the stark differences between having the authority to make decisions and being accountable for the implementation of initiatives assigned by others. Chris shared: "I feel that tension… because we're mediating between the organization and our staff." It was particularly powerful when it came to upholding institutional expectations about finances with staff whose sole focus was on high-quality learning for students:

> *In terms of managerial decisions, budget matters. Unfortunately, sometimes the budget is at odds with what I know about effective teaching. Specifically, class size has an impact on pedagogical approach. So, while budget is telling me one thing, what I know about good teaching is telling me another (Kevin).*

Next, we learned that whether you are talking to your faculty, updating your dean, or discussing with your peers, an effective communication style is critical. Chris shared "It's speaking for the organization and those contexts and speaking for our staff to that organization, so it's being a voice for both." Maura added, "We're trying to mediate up, mediate down, and report up so we are very much stuck at that crossroads." Being 'stuck at the crossroads' gives some insight into the challenges we experienced transforming from PETE to an academic leader and needing to speak to multiple levels of our institutions.

This understanding has not ensured success but means we are better prepared and increases the likelihood of positive outcomes. The findings do not reveal a radical transformation, but a deepening of our understanding of our roles which requires us to be the voice of both institution and our staff in meetings which are often difficult and create anxiety and discomfort for us.

Reflection

There is a strong alignment between the boundary-crossing mechanism of 'reflection' and the S-STEP methodology as both involve learning 'something new about [one's] own and others' practices" (Akkerman & Baker, 2011, p. 144– 145). In essence, we used our collaborative self-study as a means of navigating boundaries. In our collaboration we bridged thousands of kilometers around the globe, diverse institutions, and yet our collective lived experiences in our academic careers revealed many similarities. What became clear after reviewing our meta-reflections, was that our changes were not revolutionary but more evolutionary:

> *…what I believe in, and my vision of leadership hasn't changed much. What has solidified, is my understanding that a leader cannot really only be committed to any 'one' approach. While I often see myself as a servant leader, I also see instances where being visionary, transformational, and even autocratic have their places. (Kevin Meta-Reflection)*

> *While I still hold true to my values as a leader I don't think there have been the opportunities to lead. I have found myself for the past two (Covid) years managing/administrating more than leading…Perhaps I need to focus less on the people and more on the faculty research agenda. People are always to the fore of my mind – I'm beginning to think I'm using people and their exhaustion due to Covid as an excuse not to lead and push the research agenda! (Maura Meta-Reflection)*

> *Teaching was "the reason I got up in the morning and worked late nights and weekends preparing my classes" [quote from an early reflection]. OK I still really enjoy teaching. My horizons have expanded and it is not the center of my world anymore. (Chris Meta-Reflection)*

Often the insights of others served to enrich our understanding of our own evolving roles, while other times it was incredibly comforting to realize that we were not alone in our struggles. Tracking our reflective journeys revealed a

growing sense of confidence in who we are and what we stand for, and critically also what we will not stand for. This meta-reflection re-affirms our core values but also highlights changes that otherwise may have seeped into our practices and understandings unnoticed.

Implications

This study examined our growth as leaders and our responses to the challenges of boundary crossing in academic leadership; more specifically, the mechanisms and processes by which we crossed these boundaries. Lessons we have taken from crossing boundaries in academic leadership will serve us well as we continue to cross further boundaries, both into new or into more familiar spaces. When people journey beyond established boundaries, they explore new frontiers which can be career and life-changing--all are ripe with novelty, uncertainty, and complexity (Lawson, 2021). We have also come to understand that boundaries are permeable and we can choose to traverse them with greater confidence because we have acquired a repertoire of strategies.

Results indicated several tangible outward-facing shifts in our roles. These changes have varied from the highly visible changes of our clothing choices, to the more nuanced changes of our roles and which 'voices' or 'identities' we should use in what contexts as we began to interact with different, often influential people in the university. In essence, we used our new positions to speak for teacher education and, while initially uncomfortable, with time we began to settle into our new roles. More difficult to pinpoint are the changes that were wrought on the inside. We have crossed the threshold and joined what some deem 'the dark side' of academia, a circle of knowing where we have assumed power (perceived or real). In some instances, we have transitioned from interacting daily with students as a teacher to dealing with them from a distance. The opportunity to reflect has revealed a significant shift in roles but continuity in our values. Our titles have changed but our non-negotiable principles endure, often in opposition to managerial mandates. We are still exploring how that has impacted our relationships with them and our own satisfaction and thoughts about ourselves as academics. Future collaborative work will explore the extent to which our perception of our institutions and the academy changed as a result of dealing with a wider range of colleagues in roles that had previously been hidden to us.

The work of teacher educators is critical in supporting the educational experiences of students in schools. Teacher education is impacted by policy decisions at the levels of programme, faculty, institutional, regional, national, and even global scales. Therefore, Allison and Ramirez (2020) note the value of exploring the "leverage teacher education and its leaders may have in shaping the education landscape versus simply being reactive/responsive" (p.1220). Attempting to cross the threshold into academic leadership was a way we felt we could contribute more broadly to the field of education. We experienced tensions, we made mistakes and learnt more about what we could influence, and how we might achieve this effectively. We also learnt the limitations of our influence. As S-STEP researchers we are "ever emergent and always becoming" (Pinnegar et al. 2020, p.97), and as such we are continually crossing boundaries and thresholds in the process of becoming. Having spent time in the boundaries surrounding academic leadership, we find we are better able to navigate these zones and cross them with more confidence. The tensions and challenges for teacher educators in moving into academic leadership persist (North et al., 2021), however, we find that the journey remains largely worthwhile. Our achievements in supporting teacher education are perhaps modest, but we have seen the educational landscape from a different perspective and have deepened our understandings. We have found our work fraught with tensions and just as importantly, ripe with opportunities.

Having experienced the benefits of S-STEP as teacher educators, it was natural for us to apply these same methods and approaches to our work as academic leaders. We have been asked if what we are truly doing is S-STEP because of the shift in context. According to a strict definition, we are no longer using S-STEP but we are now embracing our career shifts and bringing our powerful research methods to bear on new questions, communities, and audiences. The principles remain the same- finding deeper understandings of the self in our new roles and discovering this together with others. It is conversations with our collaborators in this S-STEP which provide us with crucial insights, impel us to pause and reflect and which allows us to be more intentional about our roles.

We conclude by asking, "So, what has the self-study of our transitions into leadership taught us that may be useful or significant to others?" The first lesson, for us, is don't be afraid to be vulnerable. Uncertainty can be scary but also

signifies an opportunity for learning. The unknown associated with a boundary crossing can be a productive place, a space of tension, and also of potential and opportunity (Berry, 2020). We shared how our S-STEP provided invaluable opportunities to learn from others and address role ambiguity. Second, becoming a leader requires us to think about the role as dynamic and variable, not fixed and static. The unpredictable circumstances faced on a daily basis were heightened due to Covid and shaped our actions as leaders, and our actions similarly impacted situations (Loughran, 2015). Reflection highlighted how our enduring values provided valuable guiding principles in the midst of this unpredictability. Finally, becoming a leader doesn't happen overnight. While you may assume a title or role, crossing thresholds/boundaries is not instantaneous. Instead, growing into that role, and becoming a leader takes time and there is distinct value in investigating the space between who you were, who you are, and who you are yet to become. S-STEP was a robust way to examine our learning experiences and make sense of our boundary crossings. Similarly, teacher educators involved in S-STEP are well positioned to add to the body of literature to help others to thrive as they assume leadership roles to help shape the future of teacher education.

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