

Becoming Boundary Spanners in a Long-Term Engaged Scholarship Partnership

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Abstract

Utilizing narrative inquiry, members of a school-university partnership examined the intricacies of participating in a long-term collaboration predicated upon engaged scholarship. As part of this investigation, the authors examined the convergence of different boundary spanner roles taken up by the members of the partnership and the effect of this on the goals of enacting engaged scholarship. By identifying instances that shaped their roles, commitment, and implementation of engaged scholarship, the authors captured the challenges and opportunities of sustained engagement as boundary spanners. Through a reflexive process, they identified shifts in the collaboration's goals and outcomes, revealing pivotal ruptures or turning points in their journey. These events are argued to be crucial for their development as boundary spanners. The study emphasizes the importance of translating reflection into practice.

Public high schools function in an ever-changing environment of students, teachers, curriculum, and policy mandates. Due to such perpetually shifting variables, schools can be challenging settings for carrying out long-term research. When engaged scholarship—with its attendant goals of transformation through generating democratically derived new knowledge and products for the public good—is added to this equation, conducting long-term research in schools becomes even more complicated (Barker, 2004; Boyer, 1990; Doberneck et al., 2010; Schaefer & Riviera, 2013).

Throughout such a fluctuating context and the intertwining of complex cultures, we have been involved in a school-university partnership for the past seven years as a team of literacy researchers and practitioners invested in enhancing writing instruction for adolescents. Our partnership began in conjunction with a U.S. Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods federal grant. As part of the grant, school district leadership sought help with writing instruction from university faculty specializing in literacy education. This request was due to the desire of the school district to increase writing scores on the state standardized test (Lesley et al., 2023). We call our partnership the “literacy champions.” This name signifies our shared goal of fostering strong literacy practices in the English program at the high school where this work takes

place.

The first three years of the partnership were a process of trial and error as faculty and leadership at the high school looked for a way to work together productively. During this time, the school-university team faced turnover in leadership and uncertainty about the best way to incorporate university researchers into the routines and expectations of the English program. After the first few years, a new literacy coach with a propensity for collaboration was hired at the high school, and the partnership began to evolve into an engaged scholarship project (Lesley et al., 2021). As we ventured into enacting engaged scholarship, the goals of the partnership became better articulated but were still based on the original agreement to:

1. Support student writing development in general and help students reach higher levels of academic performance on the state assessment.
2. Cultivate teacher identities as writers and writing teachers.
3. Highlight best practices for teaching writing, especially for underrepresented populations of students.

These goals of the partnership coalesced around ongoing and embedded professional development, classroom instruction in writing, and applicable scholarship. As teacher confidence and student writing skills increased, the project

evolved into a long-term engaged scholarship endeavor, one that has lasted seven years since the hiring of the new literacy coach.

As each individual in the collaboration began to tackle what professional reciprocity really entailed in enacting engaged scholarship, we had to reconsider our norms and routines. For instance, viewing data from the stance of putting school partners at the center of their experiences required the university team to completely rethink their tasks and positionality as researchers (Harré, 2015). Similarly, co-constructing a research design required the school partners to think about the broader impacts and relevance of their work within the realm of academia. In effect, each member of the collaboration had to learn to address new audiences, join new communities of discourse, and become a boundary spanner to bring about transformed practice (Sandmann et al., 2014).

Review of Literature

A substantial body of research exists on school-university partnerships, highlighting their focus on both pre-service teacher education and in-service teacher professional development. A strand of this work has addressed carrying out collaborative research (Bernay et al., 2020). For example, Baumfield and Butterworth (2007) investigated interactions between teachers and academics in 51 schools participating in school-university partnerships centered on teacher research. Through this work, Baumfield and Butterworth noted collaborative teacher research “forged a radical collegiality” leading to mutual transformation (p. 412). Other studies have detailed lessons learned during the development of engaged scholarship enacted through school-university partnerships (Martinovic et al., 2017). For example, Ndlovu (2011) found that adopting a social justice approach to interrogate implementation of mandated curricula with teachers through a shared inquiry highlighted how schools and universities can serve as valuable resources for each other.

Another theme emerging from the body of work on engaged scholarship in school-university partnerships is the role of boundary spanners (Miller, 2007; Stevens, 1999). Boundary spanners are individuals who expand their roles through “unique behaviors that occur at the periphery of groups, organizations, and institutions” in ways that “engage stakeholders, negotiate power dynamics, communicate expectations, and build connections” (Sandmann et al., 2014, pp.

84–85). Boundary spanners must understand the unique cultures that exist on both sides of a partnership (Hsu et al., 2007). Boundary spanners possess myriad skills, including but not limited to collaborative problem solving, relationship building, and integrated scholarship (Purcell et al., 2020). Essentially, boundary spanners demonstrate “effective collaborative behavior” and play a significant role in developing and maintaining partnerships (Sandmann et al., 2014, p. 85).

In addition to their collaborative nature, boundary spanners also build capacity in multiple contexts to bring about “actionable knowledge” by crossing disciplinary, organizational, cultural, geographic, and temporal boundaries (Goodrich et al., 2020, p. 2). In industry contexts, boundary spanners have historically been viewed as individuals who could serve as bridges between organizations (Purcell et al., 2020). In higher education contexts, boundary spanners have been viewed as individuals who are tasked with fostering and managing external partnerships (Gauntner & Hansman, 2017). For example, Weerts and Sandmann (2010) emphasized the importance of cultivating boundary spanners in research universities to “build bridges to community partners” (p. 634). With the increased emphasis on community engaged scholarship in higher education, there are also studies that examine graduate students’ increased exposure and training in this paradigm. For instance, Wegemer and Renick (2021) examined graduate students’ perceptions of power dynamics and equity in boundary spanner roles, noting that these students often navigate between partner-focused and university-focused positionalities.

While the research based on the complexities of boundary spanner roles in university and community settings is growing, most studies focus on boundary spanners as occupying a single position (Peterman et al., 2021; Wegemer & Renick, 2021). Further, these individuals are typically nonacademic university staff in an outreach and engagement office who are appointed to a formal position as a boundary spanner (Gauntner & Hansman, 2017; Miller, 2008). As such, more research is warranted that examines the convergence and inter-relatedness of multiple boundary spanners operating in a collaborative context and their roles in community partnerships. In the present study, as a team of school-university partners, we examined the different ways we enacted being boundary spanners collectively during challenging events with tribulation and

change.

Author Positionality Statements

As a team, we entered this work from different viewpoints. Although many of our positionalities overlap with one another, we each bring unique experiences and responsibilities to the collaboration and thus different perspectives on boundary spanning. To contextualize the study, we here describe our individual positionalities as we viewed them through the lens of what it means to carry out engaged scholarship.

Mellinee Lesley

The importance of conducting research that is respectful of teachers, students, and their families started for me as a classroom teacher. I remember several encounters with researchers from the local university in the guise of professional development that were not collegial or respectful. Consequently, becoming a boundary spanner in an educational setting began as I questioned “fly-by” outside advice that was not applicable. As I became a university researcher and began working with schools, I was haunted by the memory of professional development that was external and disconnected from the realities of my classroom. For me, being a boundary spanner as a university researcher means not falling into the trap of being the outside expert peddling knowledge. Additionally, I know that I am following university scholars who have treated schools poorly and therefore have a lot of ground to recover in regaining trust and addressing a potential power differential. Being lucky enough to have the opportunity to work with a school community across several years, through moments of uncertainty and joy, has helped me understand the complex story of resilience in schools. It has also helped me forge an identity and role for myself as a university researcher that is grounded in mutual discovery.

Amy Higgins

When I transferred to this campus, the university partners were already here. My previous experience with a similar partnership at another campus had not been a positive one, so I was leery from the beginning. Not only did I have to win over a department of English teachers who had been led by a very ineffective instructional coach, I also had to ensure that this partnership would not negatively impact their work. At the beginning, the university partners were in classrooms, co-teaching and planning with the teachers. I quickly

realized that this model wasn’t going to work with the vision I had of where we needed to be; as an underperforming school, we had little time to improve before more oversight came. We had to have a single vision implemented in a targeted way. The university team and I negotiated a new model that would work for both of our goals—that was when I knew we would be able to work together in a positive way. This would become a partnership, not a directive from either side.

Elizabeth Stewart

I entered into this partnership as a first-year doctoral student in the fall of 2019, and while I was immediately welcomed, I knew I had to earn my spot. I was proud to be a part of this partnership and more than happy to do the work, but as a first-year student, I felt that I was much better off seeing and observing instead of speaking. I grew in confidence with sharing my opinions over the four years I worked with this partnership, and I saw the literacy coach and the high school teachers as my bosses just as much as the university faculty. This collaboration is so important because of the amount of learning and growth both sides experienced for the betterment of students. Ongoing learning from so many points of entry into the partnership was an important ingredient of becoming a boundary spanner.

Johanna Keene

As a newcomer to the project, I felt a good deal of fear. I knew how to operate in a public school and, having taught in the same district, I had previous relationships and knowledge of this particular school. However, I realized that my anxiety was matched by our collaborators. We all seemed to engage in a delicate dance of understanding each other, negotiating who was leading and when, all while in the chaos of an “underperforming” school. I realized I brought with me all of my experiences as a literacy teacher and coach, and while I thought I had left that behind, I hadn’t. I still felt the pressures of a high-stakes testing environment and a standards-driven curriculum, all on top of the regular daily rhythms of school. I realized that this marriage of experiences within our team led to greater insights, bigger questions, and research that truly matters. Engaging in research that purposefully and intentionally addresses the realities of the school was key to my participation in this engaged study and in becoming a boundary spanner.

Savannah Terry

I was introduced to this partnership as a student teacher, and I was instantly fascinated with the academic conversations that were happening. I remember it being so refreshing for me to experience professional conversations about research that were happening in the real world and not just in my college classrooms. At this point in time, I was unsure of where my career would take me, but I knew that if I had the opportunity to be a part of something like this, I was going to take advantage of it. Thankfully, I was hired on as an English teacher that spring, and I have worked within this partnership ever since. The amount I have learned is immeasurable, and I truly believe that the data that has been collected over the years has allowed me to see that instruction is the key ingredient to me becoming a boundary spanner who collaborates actively with other teachers in order to make us all more successful with student learning and writing instruction.

Problem Statement

Since boundary spanners have typically been presented in extant literature as individuals hired to serve an institution or organization in a networking capacity, in our study, we wanted to explore the different ways boundary spanners enact their roles in a collective effort. Now in our seventh year of working together to address a shared goal, we decided to examine how we reached this point by analyzing our journey. Throughout the years of the partnership, we have sought to measure the success of our collaboration through evidence of student learning and reform in writing instruction (Lesley et al., 2023). At this juncture, however, we wanted to take a deeper look at the factors that fostered sustainability in our partnership and galvanized our roles as boundary spanners. To understand the power of engaged scholarship, we set out to examine how we had been transformed as practitioners by identifying pivotal moments in our work together. We came to see these pivotal moments as turning points in our partnership because they forged new territory in our roles as boundary spanners and in the enactment of engaged scholarship. Paradoxically, turning points often felt like an ending, but evolved into a new understanding of the partnership's merit, fostered intellectual growth, and sharpened our understanding of what it means to be a boundary spanner.

Methods

To assess the partnership through collective reflection, in this study we asked: *How have we been transformed (e.g., become boundary spanners) through participating in a long-term engaged scholarship project?* To examine the experiences of our shared work, we employed narrative inquiry guided by the theme of turning points in our collaboration (Caine et al, 2022; Heller, 2023). We utilized narrative inquiry because narratives capture complex phenomena (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As “the study of the ways humans experience the world,” narrative is predicated on capturing the unfolding of lived experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Caine et al. (2022) argued the philosophical roots of narrative inquiry reside in Dewey’s (1938) notions of experience as an important foundation of learning. Just as Dewey opined about the important role experience plays in building student knowledge, Caine et al. (2022) contended narratives, as a form of knowledge, are predicated upon experience. Additionally, we felt narrative inquiry was a perfect methodology to employ because it not only honored the voices of both school and university partners but also permitted both teams to contribute to knowledge building (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). In this manner, narrative inquiry demonstrates engaged scholarship principles of equitable knowledge production, reciprocal learning, and mutually beneficial outcomes. Utilizing narrative inquiry also highlighted the ways experience can become data (Caine et al., 2022).

As “method and representation are interwoven traits,” writing narratively about our work facilitated an important process of our coming to understand more precisely what it meant for each of us to be a boundary spanner (Heller, 2023, p. 8). Narrative addresses “the immense complexity of the context” and the ways stories are “always lived out within interwoven and multilayered scenes and plot lines” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 150). Placing our stories side by side helped contextualize the uniqueness of our experiences in a shared and changing landscape. Thus, narrative was a logical means through which to interrogate our experiences in an engaged scholarship partnership because it honored both school and university partners’ unique perspectives and voices. Moreover, each story contributed to knowledge building in this study.

We began this process by piecing together narratives of turning points in becoming boundary spanners. Caine et al. (2022) argue

that narratives are cultivated “in the midst” of a life that is unfolding across time, where themes are the threads that weave a story together. They explain, “This idea of continuity over time, albeit with breaks, gaps and ruptures, is a key idea in narrative inquiry. At any point in time, experience is always something on the way. Time, therefore, is something in the midst” (Caine et al., 2022, p. 63). Caine et al. (2022) also argue that narratives should be understood as the ways experiences grow out of other experiences and lead to new experiences to illustrate the fluidity of time and meaning in rendering a story.

To develop narratives, we first brainstormed the following series of questions designed to evaluate our experience with becoming boundary spanners through conducting engaged scholarship:

1. Do we have a shared mission?
 - Are we all “literacy champions”?
 - Are we all working together to help kids achieve success?
2. Are we staying focused on the mission?
3. Are we engaged in rigorous scholarship?
4. Do the results of the scholarship impact the school and the field of literacy education?
5. Can we discuss our work with a variety of audiences?
6. Do all of the people get along? Do we respect each person’s role?
7. Are the people from the university respectful of the school and community environment?
 - Does the university team view the partnership through the school team’s eyes?
 - Does the university team value what the school values?
8. Are we able to deal with unforeseen obstacles/issues and maintain the partnership?
9. Does everyone have different yet significant responsibilities leading to meaningful input?
10. Do we have a shared professionalism and commitment to the project despite our unique vantage points?

After we identified these questions and discussed how each question could help us interrogate the partnership, we shared insights into the ways our work had evolved across time. We initially noted the importance of developing and maintaining a shared mission and vision, overcoming obstacles, strengthening communication, and seeking evidence of student learning. As we looked at these tenets side by side, we came to see them demarcated by turning points in the partnership that shaped our roles and deepened commitment. We were intrigued

by the notion of turning points and discussed what turning points we experienced given our distinctive roles, responsibilities, expectations, and routines within the partnership. We each reflected on events in the partnership that we recognized as milestones where we began to move in a new direction toward our ultimate goal. In this manner, we viewed turning points in the partnership as indicators of the depth of engaged scholarship and distillations of our evolution as boundary spanners.

We began to see the value in events that disrupted our work but also helped us deepen our commitment to and understanding of the partnership. The notion of turning points was an organic means through which to describe the movement away from a projected path of work. Thus, we defined a turning point in the partnership as a change in direction that brought about an unexpected positive result. To gather a sense of the departures in the process of enacting engaged scholarship in a long-term partnership, we identified turning points in our responses to the questions, and used them to develop narratives about instances that could have led to a rupture but instead served to solidify and deepen the partnership.

Once we identified key incidents, we each volunteered to draft a narrative that captured the events in the turning point and illuminated the importance of the turning point in carrying out engaged scholarship. We reviewed each other’s narratives and explored how each turning point served to enhance our roles as boundary spanners in the partnership and how being a boundary spanner was a necessary step in furthering engaged scholarship. Developing the narratives was an iterative process that began with writing individual narratives from one perspective. After sharing our narratives, we revised them to include all of our perspectives as well as a discussion about the implications for broader application to the field’s understanding of engaged scholarship. This writing and re-writing served as member checking and fostered reflexivity among the members of the team.

Turning Points

Through this reflexive process, we identified five turning points that we felt were crucial moments in the development of our roles and perspectives within the partnership, as shown in Table 1. Each turning point depicts how the event facilitated both engaged scholarship and our individual growth as boundary spanners. We

Table 1. Turning Points in the Partnership

Year	Turning Point	Engaged Scholarship Significance	Boundary Spanning Growth
2017	New literacy coach hired to lead English language arts and reading instruction	The new literacy coach viewed working with the university team as a collaboration as opposed to a burdensome addition to the functions of the school.	University researchers had to confront assumptions about disciplinary knowledge and the positionality as an “expert.”
2019	The U.S. Department of Education grant funding ended	The connection between the university and the high school came about because of this grant. The end of the grant could have meant the end of the partnership.	It became important for us as a group to view the partnership in a different way. Instead of an obligation, we had to find value in the work we were doing and move forward differently.
2020	COVID-19 quarantine and remote learning	University researchers were asked to be flexible in conducting their research while teachers adjusted to their “new normal” of teaching remotely.	As a partnership, we began to gain a better understanding of what research was the most important/beneficial to collect.
2021	Return from remote learning and change in teacher staffing	The people on the team changed, which required a renewed sense of roles and responsibilities within the partnership.	This led to understanding the importance of shared values, mission, and how to continue progressing in the work while integrating new people.
2020–2023	Building a collaborative record of scholarship	Scholarly products legitimized the role of research in the partnership.	Scholarship has expanded the audiences we are able to reach with our work and significantly stretched our identities as practitioners and researchers.

also contemplate how our experiences contribute to conversations about carrying out engaged scholarship in the field.

Turning Point One: New Literacy Coach Hired

The first turning point began with the inception of our team. In the beginning, there was no team; there was a literacy researcher from the local university who had been assigned to support a high school with writing instruction. This agreement was reached through the request of Central Office administration in the school district and a college of education dean as part of a U.S. Department of Education grant. There was no one at the high school seeking this collaboration. There was no contact person. There was just a researcher inelegantly injected into a school setting, working in isolation toward an ill-defined goal with no clear deliverables. The university researcher described her memory of this experience:

When I was assigned to work with a high school to improve student writing performance, I was excited to take on this project. However, the principal was not part of the decision to place me at his school and didn't seem too happy about this arrangement. Consequently, there was no administrator or teacher I was assigned to work with. No conduit. I remember standing in an empty hallway with a plastered smile on my face, trying to be part of a conversation between a Central Office administrator who had invited me to attend a pep rally and the principal who did not make eye contact with me. They were well acquainted with each other and friendly, but there was tension in their careful words about curriculum. I became an awkward pair of shoes standing in their circle. To top it off, it was late Friday afternoon before a holiday weekend. I am sure we all wanted to retreat to somewhere beautiful or at least uncomplicated, but here we stood in an evacuated building trying to sort out some unnamed issue with student learning. As I think back to this day, I see how I was already being guided to think about the complexity of stakeholders in this context. I was also being nudged to redesign my role as a traditional researcher. I needed to listen, observe, and get ready to jump into a swiftly

moving river of competing perspectives without getting pulled under.

Not surprisingly, the school being *directed* to work with a university researcher was problematic for all parties involved. Also, not having a clear understanding of processes or goals for a partnership was a hindrance. There was no one to take responsibility for the day-to-day negotiation of roles. No one had a clear vision or sense of purpose for the partnership. The university researcher recalled:

Just as I was starting to panic about not fulfilling my obligation with the Department of Education grant, the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program specialist for the district asked me to assist students in AVID classes with developing an essay that would also become a publication of student writing. As I crouched beside students in class after class to coax the story of a day in their life onto a piece of notebook paper, I often thought about what it meant to bear witness as a researcher. This was an important shift in my identity as a scholar. I didn't have to immediately dispense advice and have all of the answers. In fact, it was critical not to have preconceived answers. It was also important to gather as much information as I could about student writing practices to truly understand how I could be of assistance. For two years, I drifted along the periphery of the school with minor projects. I took a lot of notes. Most of my impressions were developed for a vague and hypothetical audience, but I was learning a great deal about the context of the school and what it meant to be an engaged scholar.

Thorough understanding of the community partner's context can occur through myriad ways in engaged scholarship. In this case, it was somewhat inadvertent but nonetheless critical for building an engaged scholarship partnership. Engaged scholarship is driven by community-defined issues (da Cruz, 2018, p. 155). Understanding the complexity of these issues requires university partners to step back and permit community partners to take the lead on determining what matters because such concerns are context

specific. Thus, the challenge of not having clear direction turned into an opportunity for building understanding about the school.

In 2017, a new literacy coach with a stratified plan for writing instruction was hired to reorganize the English curriculum. Shortly after, she began to formulate a design for professional development with English teachers. This plan could have led to the departure of the university researcher. Instead, the literacy coach articulated a collaborative role for the university researcher and the researcher continued to evolve her expectations for her role in the partnership.

The literacy coach was also going through her own adjustment of working with a university partner. A few years later, the literacy coach stated the following about joining this partnership:

When I started working at [the high school], it was a low-performing “improvement required” campus, with the English department needing some of the most support. I was asked to “revamp” the practice in the department. I formulated a five-year plan that included very specific steps. To be honest, I needed the practices I wanted to implement to be the only ones the teachers heard. I also needed to measure the success of my plan on the whole English I and English II team.

With the inclusion of a new literacy coach, both changes in practice and changes in perspective took place at the high school. One change included a shift in the focus of the university side of the partnership from one of idiosyncratically providing feedback about writing instruction to a few teachers and students, to one that involved a broader research-focused analysis of classroom instruction and student performance across all ninth and tenth grades. This role change in the university team also marked the beginning of developing a shared research design to which all members of the partnership contributed. Changes in perspective were threefold: (1) the high school side of the partnership became more receptive to feedback from the university side, (2) the university team’s stance toward research changed to more of a focus on understanding the perspectives of the school partners, and (3) the partnership emphasized the importance of instructional reform taking place at the school for wider audiences.

In this manner, the moment the partnership began to function in a mutually beneficial way

was the first turning point. Developing a shared vision leading to an understanding of meaningful products—such as providing reports to the school team or procuring grant funding—was essential to the longevity of the partnership. The lessons learned from this turning point center on the importance of having someone in the school setting take the lead and liaise with both sides of the partnership. Also, taking time to listen to community partners expands empathy and understanding for external researchers. Although it was unintended, being placed in an observatory role for two years greatly built the capacity of the university researcher to collaborate with equanimity, understand the complexities of writing instruction, and build rapport with students, teachers, and leadership at the school. These experiences were essential for facilitating boundary spanning.

Turning Point Two: The U.S. Department of Education Grant Funding Ended

The university team and the high school became more collaborative in the first couple of years. With monetary backing from the university, teachers could be compensated for professional development beyond the scope of their contract. In addition, the team was able to try new ideas because they could purchase extra supplies, books, and other materials to support those initiatives. Funding became a “hook” to entice the high school team to be actively involved with the partnership.

The literacy coach who is charged with oversight of the English program at the high school with respect to reviewing lesson plans, organizing professional learning community meetings, monitoring student progress, and coaching teachers on their literacy practices created a series of workshops for teachers centered around increasing literacy skills. Traditionally, the majority of professional development came from the district and was the same across all schools, but these new workshops were designed specifically for and held at the individual high school campus where the teachers worked. Teachers were very excited to attend a professional development opportunity where they felt their individual classroom needs and the needs of their own campus were met. The next year, that funding ended. This meant that the high school was no longer required to collaborate as a part of the administrative agreement of the grant. Without this funding, teachers could no longer be mandated or expected to attend extra meetings and summer professional development. It became imperative to examine the motivation of

the entire team and adjust the focus from directive professional development to something that was more personal for the teachers on the team.

Building on the first round, where the learning was tailored to the needs of the campus, the next round evolved into a focus on the teachers themselves. The literacy coach and the university team created workshops for the teachers that allowed them to learn about themselves as writers. This focus empowered the teachers to see themselves as writers instead of only writing teachers. The evolution in focus was the way the team adjusted to new circumstances in order to preserve the work and its importance to the whole team.

Having been through training that allowed teachers to explore their own writing identity and empowered them to teach writing in a way that was tailored to the needs of their own students, the members of the partnership became intrinsically motivated—especially since members of the university side of the team changed their roles from external experts to collaborators focused on teaching through the teachers' eyes. This organically contributed to a shared goal as the partnership had become valuable to all, even outside of significant teacher stipends from the original grant. One of the teachers explained:

Initially, it can be intimidating to have new people in your classroom; however, it became clear quickly that they are there to observe student learning and collect student data, not to judge me as a teacher. The data that is collected is incredibly valuable to reflect on and build upon year after year due to the fact that it is so detailed. It is refreshing to look at data that comes from such a different lens than the data that is usually presented, and it is helpful to use while looking forward and figuring out how to incorporate it into more meaningful practice.

This teacher also noted the example of an anchor chart that was used in a lesson as a result of the collaboration about what student writers needed. Teachers began to see professional development as something that they did as part of their work with students, not something they did because they were required to and being paid for it. The work within the first couple of years really shaped this ethos; teachers felt part of a team of educators who were in partnership with a

university. The team looked at what data would help the teachers determine strengths and weaknesses in their students' learning. The university team was happy to partner with the classroom teachers to continue their data collection in a way that answered teachers' questions and concerns. So, everyone embarked on a new plan where the foundation of professional development had been set, teachers were ready to implement what they learned, and the university researchers were ready to gather data to help the high school determine the effectiveness of their efforts.

Turning Point Three: COVID-19 Quarantine and Remote Learning

In the spring of 2020, this high school, like so many others around the country, was forced to quickly turn to remote learning as a result of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The unknown future of what teaching would look like was alarming, as the high school members of the partnership were forced into "survival mode." Out of necessity, they asked the university members of the team for a bit of grace as they adjusted to the new normal of remote learning. Like classroom instruction, all interactions among the members of the partnership had to be switched to Google Meets and Zoom, rather than in-person meetings. Teachers were suddenly tasked with teaching students how to write without being able to see their writing process in person. One teacher stressed the difficulty of this setback when she said "we went months without even knowing what our students' handwriting looked like." The university members of the team were forced to step back from gathering evidence and data from classroom observations to allow teachers the time they requested to learn how to teach in a new way. Despite the pandemic, the partnership was still a priority and persisted through a time of dramatic change in public education.

For all members of the team, this change led to a greater amount of flexibility and grace toward one another. During a time where the partnership had the potential to weaken or end, we continued to work together and refused to let that happen. If anything, persevering through these changes made us stronger. The pandemic also led to rethinking the roles and responsibilities of each member of the partnership in terms of what was truly essential. We were able to determine what data served us and what data we could do without. The literacy coach noted the following about this time:

This was a second place where, because of the drastic changes in the school world, the [university side of the team] had to completely change what they were doing. Their research pretty much had to pause. We continued to meet online to check in first, but also to brainstorm ways the work could continue in such a different time.

One teacher also stated that “COVID called for a lot of teacher modeling and ‘watch how I do it so that hopefully one day soon you can too.’” Teachers were at such a loss on how to teach students who could no longer touch the supplies that they desperately needed to use, or get close enough to one another in order to truly collaborate in a way that was meaningful. The interactive, tactile learning that we relied so heavily upon and that proved to help make our students successful for many years was replaced by a computer screen with lessons that were only attainable digitally.

Through trial and error, we quickly came to the conclusion that modeling our own thinking process and writing examples to students was the best option. This gave students the opportunity to follow along and understand the skills that they needed even if that meant they couldn’t do it themselves just yet. Additionally, administering instruction in such a way helped students feel like they still had a teacher rather than just a stranger behind a screen. As a partnership, we were able to look at student writing and see if they were retaining the modeling that they were receiving and how they were incorporating the lessons into their own writing. Upon reflection, one teacher stated:

Looking back allowed us to truly see each other as boundary spanners during this time. This was eye-opening to me. It’s hard to notice your hard work when you are in the trenches day in and day out, but the importance and payout is clear in hindsight.

Turning Point Four: Return from COVID Quarantine and Change in the Team

The world was changing and so was the team, including three new staff members at the high school and one new research assistant. The research assistant described the experience in this way:

Having left my job of teaching and literacy coaching in elementary schools to pursue

my PhD full time, I entered the high school fearfully and with great trepidation. What did I know about high school literacy and pedagogy, especially returning after the COVID-19 shutdown? And what did I know about research? Alas, here I was, joining the literacy champions in their first professional learning community meeting as a brand new research assistant. Thankfully, I wasn’t alone in my newness; the English department employed three new staff members. We sat around the table—one tenured full professor with five years of experience in this school, two research assistants, one with four years of experience and the other with three years of experience with this school, a literacy coach with four years of experience, two English teachers with four years of experience, three English I and II teachers with no experience at this school, and one brand-new research assistant. Would we persist this year? After all of the challenges of COVID-19 and all the typical challenges of teaching in a historically underperforming high school, would this motley crew withstand the pressures and expectations of another year, persevering as literacy champions? I think we all had our doubts.

We began our meetings with the usual first weeks of the school milieu, primarily discussing how this new batch of students were reintegrating into life in the school building, albeit with certain safety protocols in place. During remote learning, students had become accustomed to going at their own pace, working when and how they preferred, and operating without a routine. Teachers were accustomed to students collaborating, sharing, and moving around the classroom. Despite being back in the school, the formerly taken-for-granted ways of being and doing in school were no longer true. Teachers had to figure out new methods and pedagogical techniques that allowed for social distancing yet still maintained best practices. Students had to re-learn the structures of school and how to focus during a long school day. University researchers had to relearn their role in the school and adapt to ever-shifting health and safety policies and protocols.

Small moments revealed a lack of cohesion in the group in regards to the shared goals and vision of the partnership. At times, the new teachers

appeared nervous at having university researchers in their classrooms and unsure about how much to reveal about their own struggles, professionally and personally. Analyzing the partnership to foster sustainability and clarity was an incredibly important priority for new teachers. As a result, the literacy coach stated that “the research team began to examine our positionalities as researchers and roles within the partnership. We began to engage in reflexivity.” Over time, through consistency from the university researchers in showing up and getting to know the school team, trust was built and we began to form our version of the literacy champions—one that had withstood the test of not only time, but now a global pandemic, new teachers, and a new research assistant. The obstacles we had to confront continued to evolve.

As we grew in our shared vision and goals, we also discovered a need to focus on teachers as writers as well as writing teachers. Additionally, we wanted to bring in some playfulness, an enjoyable professional development series to help balance the difficulties of the year. This led to a multi-genre project (Romano, 2000) in which each member of the literacy champions partnership undertook the challenge of writing a multi-genre essay throughout the spring semester. During this project, we would meet regularly to discuss what we had written, our struggles and celebrations, as well as spend some time writing. Each member of the literacy champions reported enjoying this process, and discovered or reignited a passion for writing. Furthermore, through the writing and sharing of personal matters, the team grew closer and the three new teachers and new research assistant began to feel like important members of the team.

Turning Point Five: Collaborative Presentations and Publications

Seven years after its commencement, this partnership is continuing to grow. Now, together, we are presenting research about the partnership and beginning to publish research. We are also analyzing data and seeing the bigger picture of the data together. Through this collaboration, our team has expanded our understanding of engaged scholarship through the perspective of enacting literacy reform and deepened our own views of individual and collective accountability.

One example of our presentations is from the 70th Annual Literacy Research Association (LRA) conference in late 2020. In this presentation, we discussed our annual research question: *How*

has engaged scholarship served as a vehicle for bringing about change in writing instruction at one “underperforming” school? The university side of the team conducted observations, interviews, surveys, and questionnaires with the students, teachers, and literacy coach. The school side of the team collected state and district testing data and student writing samples. Both sides of the partnership also looked at the design of the research study each year and engaged in reflexive introspection. Together, all members of the partnership found that student writing achievement had increased, and school and university perspectives had become more aligned each year.

One of the research assistants who recently defended her dissertation and graduated from Texas Tech University continues to be amazed at the growth of the partnership during her four years she served as a student and research assistant. She still notes the privilege and the honor she had of being included in this partnership, working together to increase writing achievement in high school students. This research assistant came into the partnership during her first couple of weeks in a doctoral program, and she held the mentality that she was a guest in this high school and happy to help wherever she could.

That mentality stuck with her all four years, and the research assistant came to view the high school team as additional bosses very early on. She noted she “was not only working for the university but was also working for the school.” She hopes during her four years’ membership in this partnership she never showed anything but this mentality, as she valued being included immensely. One instance where she knew she had succeeded was in the middle of her dissertation data collection when she was handed confidential student information in helping to prepare for the state test the following spring. The research assistant did not think much of it at the time, as she was just happy to help. The impact of the day’s events hit her later. She explained, “When I got home that night the magnitude of the day’s events hit hard. I had been entrusted with student data, meaning that I had proved myself worthy of inclusion.” She had also become a true boundary spanner, traversing both teams as a member of each. Managing this data within the context of a community engaged scholarship partnership was very different from handling the data in a traditional research project. Within this partnership, the entire team was discussing the data, not just those from the university. We have grown together in analyzing

data and in the process of discovering major findings together.

To date, we have written two manuscripts for publication, received four grants, given two presentations at national conferences, and given three presentations at a regional conference together. The research assistant has since graduated, but has continued to remain involved through these kinds of scholarly activities. The scholarly products in the partnership is proof of the depth of our commitment to one another. The process of writing together has shaped all of us as scholars, expanding our understanding and work in engagement. Collaborative publishing has invited reflexivity and required us to think deeply about our partnership and reconceptualize our roles and responsibilities.

This scholarship has pressed each of us to examine what it means to be a scholar. Coming to view ourselves as engaged scholars has expanded our roles. None of us deliberately set out to be a boundary spanner, but through our professional conversations we realized that our ultimate goal was to transform literacy education at the school. All of us coming to view ourselves as engaged *scholars* was an important turning point in the partnership because it denoted the deep reflection and identity work everyone was experiencing. Our partnership has been strengthened through the process of discovery, negotiation, and crafting new knowledge together (Heisler et al., 2022; Swick et al., 2021).

Conclusion

In this partnership, as we share resources, ideas, trust, and honesty we continue to learn together about one another's worlds and traditions of building new knowledge (MacKinnon, 2010). We are designing research together (e.g., research questions, methods of data collection and data analysis) and articulating goals for the partnership to foster collective efficacy. We are also collaborating on scholarship (e.g., presentations, publishing, grant writing) and revisiting the process of our working relationship at the end of each year for continued growth for the next school year. This process of doing engaged scholarship together has offered each of us a way to become a contributor and come to know what it means to be a boundary spanner. It has also forged a new understanding of what it ultimately means to be a scholar, ways to translate reflection into practice, and why reflexive tools such as narrative inquiry help us develop an intellectual and educational legacy.

Taken together, the turning points highlighted the importance of persistence and a willingness to interrogate customary practices about high school writing instruction and research. Each turning point also highlighted the importance of impartial observation to understand the perspectives of multiple stakeholders in school-university partnerships. Importantly, each turning point facilitated the implementation of engaged scholarship. As we forged a shared history while contending with new circumstances and incorporating the views of new members, we came to understand the larger flow of components that helped sustain the partnership and measure transformation of the writing program across time. Primarily, these components included finding people who were willing to grow in their positionalities and expectations to become boundary spanners. Further, this growth entailed unique attributes. Finding ways to cultivate ongoing dialogue and reflection about the functions of the partnership and our roles as boundary spanners was another critical component to carrying out engaged scholarship.

This study sheds light on the complexities of boundary spanner roles in school-university partnerships and the ways effective boundary spanners must rise above misgivings and obstacles to function in concert with one another in educational settings. Through our investigation, we have come to see that there are multiple ways to be a boundary spanner. Additionally, we have also seen that the idea of a key boundary spanner who serves as a leader in a school-university partnership is somewhat of a misnomer (Neal et al., 2022). Boundary spanners do not work alone.

This study also highlights the importance of turning reflection into practice. For example, collaborative publishing and other scholarly products (e.g., grant proposals) helped us reflect on our experiences in a systematic and intentional manner that led to changes in the ways we conceptualized our work. Similarly, viewing scholarship as an activity that reflects the process of deepening the partnership allowed us to look beyond purely answer-focused outcomes. As Schaefer and Riviera (2013) noted, "The challenge of engaged scholarship is to demonstrate how the value of research may be seen in its works rather than its results or answers" (p. 169). This dovetails with the idea that narrative inquiry relies on "written language and how it is deployed in service" to stories, or that the ideas captured in narrative are equal in importance to construction of the

narrative (Heller, 2023, p. 19). In other words, the process of research is as important as the product for building knowledge. Viewing scholarship as reflection led to a broader impact on teaching and learning in our partnership, which parallels the importance of reflexivity in narrative inquiry and the logical pairing of narrative as a methodology to engaged scholarship (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). Finally, becoming a collective of boundary spanners as practitioners, collaborators, and scholars led to a sustained project with an unwavering core despite disruptive forces that at any point could have derailed the partnership, but instead transformed our work.

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