Working Across Boundaries: Value, Innovation and Partnership

A primer for the Working Across Boundaries: Value, Innovation and Partnership panel

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Abstract

The notion of working across boundaries continues to occupy scholars and practitioners of policy, administration and management. In recent times much attention has been placed on notions of inter-organisational, inter-jurisdictional, and inter-sectoral modes of operation and how these can be utilised to deliver on governmental goals. Indeed Kelman has argued that the topics of collaboration across government agencies (‘connect the dots’) and between government, private and non-government organisations (networks or collaborative governance) are the ‘most-discussed questions involving the performance of public institutions and achievement of public purposes’ (2007:45). The main purpose of the paper is to set the scene for the panel, raising critical questions to which contributors can return throughout the discussions, and which can focus us on developments in theory and practice post-conference.

Working Across Boundaries: A Recap and/or Re-Introduction

Amongst the various terms that have arisen to describe the phenomenon of working across boundaries – organisational, sectoral, jurisdictional, policy – one core element binds them; the notion that some sort of boundary must be traversed in order for the parties to achieve their goals, whatever they may be. We see this in the extensive discussions of joined-up government, horizontal governance, collaboration, whole-of-government, and collaborative

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government, which have been central to many of the post-NPM models jostling for dominance (see Osborne, 2006; Stoker, 2006; or Halligan, 2007 for example).

In setting the scene for the previous panel, four questions were used to frame and order a fairly messy literature, and to open up discussions on the enduring puzzles and tensions as they relate to the phenomena of working across boundaries (see O’Flynn, Halligan and Blackman, 2010 for an extensive discussion):

1. **What** do we mean by the notion of working across boundaries – what is the phenomenon?
2. **Why** has this emerged – what is the imperative for this phenomenon?
3. **What** does working across boundaries involve – what are the forms and configurations?
4. **How** does it work (or not) – what are the enablers and barriers to working across boundaries?

A brief recap of these questions and the literature driving them is provided as a means of priming the discussion for the 2011 panel which will consider some of these issues as they relate to value, innovation, and partnership. In this way our literature review and synopsis is relatively similar but the way in which we want to move the debate forward is in how we apply this to the three areas we will discuss in the panel.

**Question 1: What do we mean by the notion of working across boundaries?**

Boundaries can be physical, social or mental but they are all, in their own way, ‘metaphors of containment’ (Heracleous, 2004:100-101). Boundaries are instruments of separation and demarcation – organisational, jurisdictional, policy domain, or sectoral. Boundaries can be formal or informal and they are constructed whether or not they are ‘real’ or imagined’. Some writers differentiate between those boundaries in the mind, or symbolic boundaries (e.g. a culture) which are used to categorise people and practices, an organisational culture for example (Heracleous 2004; Lamont and Molnar, 2002). Such boundaries have profound effects on how we both understand, and then perpetuate social boundaries, and they shape social interaction and establish patterns of relationality (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). These can be contrasted with more formally constructed or objective boundaries where the line between parties or places is more clearly identifiable; an organisation is the obvious example because it will have (usually) a clear boundary drawn around its members and activities.
Other writers focus on knowledge boundaries and consider whether communication can occur across boundaries and how this might happen. For example, Carlile (2002) discussed notions of *syntax* (i.e. whether there is a shared syntax or not at the knowledge boundary), *semantics* (i.e. how the common syntax, where it exists, is interpreted and whether or not this impedes or enables communication and collaboration; how translation processes work), and *pragmatics* (i.e. the acceptance that knowledge is localized and vested in practice and that the major challenge is in dealing with the how individuals learn new knowledge and transform).

Boundaries play a critical role in ordering domains and are not necessarily ‘a symptom of obsolescent thinking’ (Pollitt, 2003:39). Designing organisations, for example, requires the drawing of boundaries and there are multiple principles for doing so – purpose, function, clientele, or place are all common (see Kelman, 2007). Of course, each organising principle creates different sorts of boundaries, and therefore raises issues of how, and when, they will need to be traversed. Thus design principles are important, but cannot overcome the fact that boundary issues will be created whatever the choice.

Boundaries can be conceived of in different ways conceptually; how this translates into policy, administration and management thinking and practice will now be briefly considered. In other words, what does working across these boundaries mean? Under Question 2 we focus more on the forms this might take. Once boundaries are created we must then design mechanisms to traverse them and an ever-expanding set of terms have emerged here. Strategic alliances, networks and partnerships are highlights in Williams (2002) work and he noted that a range of variants ‘proliferate across the policy landscape’ (p. 103). In the US notions of collaborative public management have tended to dominate (Christensen and Laegreid, 2007), and in the UK joined-up government has been the key term (Parston and Timmins, 1998). In Australia the term of choice has been whole-of-government, although some authors have adopted this as a broader term (see Christensen and Laegreid, 2007; O’Flynn, Buick, Blackman, and Halligan, 2011).

**Question 2: Why has this emerged – what is the imperative for this phenomenon?**

In our synoptic paper last year we set out six major imperative or rationales for the increased attention and interest in working across boundaries. Here we summarise them relatively briefly but invite readers to consider the fuller discussion in O’Flynn et al 2010.
1. Working across boundaries as *modus operandi* for 21st century governing. Here the focus is on how government’s need to develop distinct capabilities in cross-boundary working to deal with the looming challenges that are emerging, or will soon confront us (see Cortada et al, 2008 and the Economist Intelligence Unit, 2007 in particular on this point). For instance it has been argued that government organisations need more ‘connectedness and cooperation’ across boundaries (Cortada et al, 2008:2), and that the greatest performance challenge facing government organisations is to create collaborative effort across boundaries (Abramson, Breul and Kamensky, 2006).

2. Working across boundaries is an old story of *coordination*. There is nothing new here, and the rationale has not changed over time: working across organisations is needed to address coordination gaps (see Schermerhorn, 1974 on inter-agency cooperation, and Perri 6 on the prolonged call for inter-departmental working). These coordination challenges arise due to boundaries created through organisational design (usually on the functional principle) (Ling 2002; Perri 6, 1997; Williams, 2002).

3. Working across boundaries is a new story of *correcting disaggregation and fragmentation*. The rationale here comes from the argument that NPM-based reforms created increasingly fragmented and disaggregated systems – hence creating more boundaries - that now require new means of connecting back up. This fragmentation produced incentives to focus narrowing and undermined horizontal working (Ling, 2002, Christensen and Laegreid, 2007), making collaboration even *within* government challenging (Management Advisory Committee, 2004).

4. Working across boundaries as *response to increasing complexity*. Changes in society are driving major transformations and public policy issues are becoming more and more complex, even wicked, and they are increasing disrespectful of boundaries, and they are capable of metamorphosis, thereby increasingly requiring cross-boundary working to address them (Cortada et al, 2008; Rittel and Webber, 1971; Williams, 2002). Examples include pollution, climate change, health care, global terrorism, and natural disasters (Christensen and Laegreid, 2007; Linden, 2002), and some writers have argued that collaborative approaches are now the only way to tackle these problems (Bryson, Crosby and Middleton Snow, 2006).

5. Working across boundaries as a means to *leverage distinct and complementary capabilities*. This perspective draws more on a strategic management approach with the driving rationale being that working across boundaries enables synergies to be
realized via the bringing together of different parties and the exchange of information, for example (Pollitt, 2003). Some claim that cross-sectoral collaboration is premised on the notion that parties outside of government hold resources, capacity or legitimacy that can be leveraged to address policy challenges (Entwistle and Martin, 2005; Kelman, 2007; Cortada et al, 2008).

6. Working across boundaries to enhance efficiency, effectiveness and/or service delivery. Some writers focus on the idea that working across boundaries can enhance efficiency through a better use of scarce resources, the elimination of duplication, the removal of policy contradictions, or the bringing together of a range of services in one place (see Pollitt, 2003; Entwistle and Martin, 2005). Others argue that effective cross-boundary working can enable pooled resources, leveraging of new resources or a reduction in transaction costs (O’Flynn, 2008).

**Question 3: What does working across boundaries involve – what are the forms and configurations?**

In our previous survey of the literature we identified a range of forms and configurations that we summarise here. Many have a primary focus on collaboration, however we argue that this should not be seen as the default – collaboration requires a set of conditions to be effective and can be both costly and ineffective in some circumstances. Indeed cross-boundary working may involve collaboration, the purchase of cooperation or demands for engagement via the legitimate authority of the state (see Hardy et al, 2003 for an excellent discussion of this issue). Therefore we do not privilege collaboration over other forms and configurations.

In the literature there are numerous descriptors: Christensen and Laegreid (2007) discuss the development of joined-up government into whole-of-government, of collaborative public management, of horizontal and holistic government. Several typologies have emerged to describe different forms – some differentiate between cooperation (informal, no common mission, information sharing as needed, little risk etc), coordination (compatible missions, some common planning, some risk etc), and collaboration (more durable, shared risk, common mission, shared planning, joint resources etc) (Mattessich and Monsey, 1992; see also Himmelman, 2002 who considers four strategies for working together – networking, coordinating, cooperation and collaboration). Others set out a broader range; Leat et al (1999) identify eight approaches for working together with each reflecting higher levels of
integration - taking into account; dialogue; joint project; joint venture; satellite; strategic alliance; union; and merger.

Increasingly writers conceive of working across boundaries as an inherently collaborative endeavour (although note our point above); indeed O’Flynn (2009) argued that a ‘cult of collaboration’ had emerged in policy circles and that all types of cross-boundary working were being labelled collaboration. Donahue (2004:2), for example, refers to collaborative governance as an ‘amalgam of public, private and, civil society organizations engaged in some joint effort’, and McGuire (2006:3) has described collaborative public management as a ‘process of facilitating and operating in multiorganizational arrangements’. Both broaden out the notion of collaboration to capture a wide range of inter-organisational or multi-organisational operations, which results in collaboration becoming a much more elastic term.

Another group of writers describe working across boundaries as joined-up government (JUG). In this case JUG describes a process of ‘aligning formally distinct organizations in pursuit of the objectives of the government of the day’ and captures new ways of working, new ways of delivering services, new accountabilities and incentives, and new types of organisations (Ling, 2002:616). Pollitt (2003) took these notions further and argued that joined-up government could be horizontal (across national government), vertical (between layers of government), and that joined-up governance involved working across sectors.

The notion of networks has proposed as a dominant form of working across boundaries and there is an expansive literature on this. A typology that captures much of the field was set out by Abramson, Breul and Kamensky (2006) and they described four network forms that act as cross-boundary mechanisms:

1. Service implementation networks which are intergovernmental programs;
2. Information diffusion networks which are networks for sharing information across boundaries;
3. Problem solving networks which set agendas related to important policy areas; and,
4. Community capacity building networks built to develop social capital to enable communities to better address a range of problems. The whole-of

Whole-of-government has also been put forward as a cross-boundary configuration, this has been especially the case in Australia, but the term has now been discussed more broadly. In
the Australian context it officially described cross-portfolio working and the pursuit of objectives that crossed boundaries (Management Advisory Committee, 2004), but it soon stretched to incorporate inter-organisational, inter-jurisdictional, and inter-sectoral working (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). Christensen and Laegreid (2007) in their discussion of whole-of-government argued that what started as joined-up government had developed into the whole-of-government configuration, whilst others have positioned whole-of-government as the Australian version of JUG (O’Flynn et al, 2011).

**Question 4: How does it work (or not) – what are the enabler and barriers to working across boundaries?**

The final question we used to order the literature and which formed a major theme in the 2010 panel related to the enablers and barriers to working across boundaries. This is of central importance because it is often the case that even with the best intentions, a range of factors disrupts cross-boundary working in practice (see O’Flynn et al, 2011 for a discussion of this in the Australian context, for example). A detailed discussion is available in O’Flynn et al (2010) and here we identify the factors and provide a brief discussion.

For some writers there are clusters of enabling factors that enable cross-boundary working to be effective. Pollitt (2003) pointed to three critical ‘must-haves’ - long-term relationships to facilitate skill development, trust building, participation; a selective approach to ensure JUG is used where potential benefits outweigh risks and costs, or where issues are significant and specific; a cooperative approach, not imposed from the top. Alignment of cultures, systems, aims and incentives are important to Ling (2002), and in his summary of official guides to JUG he noted common factors such as goal setting, accountability, networking and alliances, skills and learning, and time and money. Parston and Timmins (1998) stretched this to nine factors including measurable outcomes, genuine feedback, clarity of roles and a consensus to operation and break the rules. For collaborative approaches, Linden (2004) highlighted shared purpose, a desire (not direction) to collaborate, having the right people at the table, open credible processes, and champions, and Bardach (1998) pointed to the importance of high quality operating systems, resource acquisition, steering processes, and the development of a culture of trust and joint problem-solving.

Specific factors also attract attention (several of these are considered in Alford and O’Flynn, forthcoming). This is not to suggest that a single factor enables or blocks, but just that it may
be dominant or have been emphasised. *Formal structures*, for example, have had a lot of attention both for their ability to frustrate attempts to work across boundaries (see Australian Public Service Commission, 2007; Perri 6; Cabinet Office, 2000), but also for the way in which they may enable (see Perri 6, 1997; O’Flynn et al, 2011). *Culture* is also important, both because of its potential to enable cross-boundary working but also because culture can be a powerful barrier, and this has prompt many to discuss the importance of cultural change (Christensen and Laegreid, 2007; Management Advisory Committee, 2004). *Leadership* has also been widely discussed for its blocking and facilitative potential with a range of writers pointing to its importance (Broussine, 2003; Luke, 1998; Parston and Timmins, 1998). Leaders can provide the force to enable cross-boundary work and they can leverage resources across boundaries and, of course, they have a powerful effect on the culture of an organisation. *Boundary-spanning* activity and the development of boundary-spanning individuals has been seen by several as critical to operationalising cross-boundary work. Boundary-spanning individuals are those that manage at the boundary interface building and sustaining relationships, influencing and negotiating, transmitting information (Aldrich and Herker, 1977; Williams, 2002; Alford and O’Flynn, forthcoming). *Commonality* is also seen as important to enabling cross-boundary working, in particular the notion that parties will have shared goals; Parston and Timmins (1998) referred to this as agreement on the ‘mischief’ the parties faced and would try to combat together. Others focus on *complexity*, noting that task complexity, for example, can stimulation for cross-boundary work (Lundin, 2007). *Accountability systems and structures* (including performance management and budget approaches) can also be important in blocking or enabling. For example, performance management systems can encourage and reward a narrow silo approach, or recognize and reward effective cross-boundary work prompting some to call for cross-cutting targets for government agencies (see Pollitt, 2003 on this point and also Christensen and Laegreid, 2007). Budget systems can privilege some cross-boundary forms (e.g. contracts) at the expense of others (e.g. collaboration), thereby cutting off some modes and locking budgets into a short-term and narrow departmental focus (Perri 6, 1997).
The Big Questions for 2011

Drawing on this brief re-cap and re-introduction to the core issues from the panel convened in 2010, we pose the following questions to consider in our discussions in 2011. These open up new avenues for examination but also take us back to some of the core issues that occupied us last year.

1. What is the value creation potential that comes from working across boundaries? What factors constrain and enable this potential to be realised?

Working across boundaries has the potential to contribute to public value creation through the enhancement of operational capacity (see Moore, 1995; O’Flynn, 2007; Alford and O’Flynn, 2009 for a discussion of the public value framework;). A range of modes of operating are possible and are best matched to different circumstances to deliver value (see Alford and O’Flynn, forthcoming for an extensive discussion of how government organisations work with external parties). Much of the potential is wedded to many of the rationales set out above, but what are the enablers and barriers to value creation?

2. What is the innovation potential that comes from working across boundaries? What factors constrain and enable this potential to be realised?

Innovation means a range of things to different writers (see Hartley, 2005 for an excellent introduction to the notion of innovation in the public sector). Mulgan and Albury (2003) define it as ‘new ideas that work’ and more specifically as the ‘creation and implementation of new processes, products, services and methods of delivery which result in significant improvements in the effectively, effectiveness or quality of outcomes’ (p.3).

Hartley (2005) argues that in the public sector innovation may be reinvention or it can be adaptation (to context, location or time period). We can conceive of innovations in policy design, implementation and/or service delivery, or in the way in which relationships are structured and managed across boundaries, for example. Hartley (2005) argues specifically that using more collaborative approaches can enable the creation, sharing, transfer and adaptation of practice that can spur innovation and she also discusses governance innovations, that is, the way in which we structure and manage the work of government (user participation, public private partnerships etc).
Therefore, for us a series of questions arise: what is the potential for innovation from cross-boundary working? How does working across boundaries foster or catalyze innovation in processes, products, policies and so forth that will enhance performance? How does this happen? What factors enable or block this?

3. *What is the partnership potential that comes from working across boundaries? What factors constrain and enable this potential to be realised?*

An important consideration might be whether a partnership approach *emerges* from cross-boundary working, or whether it is *required* for effective working across boundaries? If either of these propositions is accepted, then what are the constraints and enablers that enable this potential to be realised? Of course this raises the fundamental question of what we mean by partnership – a contested term. In their work, Alford and O’Flynn (forthcoming) discuss important aspects of a partnership approach as shared decision-making and/or service production and delivery. Partnership in this approach is more collaborative and just one of many modes of coordinating across boundaries; indeed it is optimal under certain conditions, not a necessary way of understanding the relationships that span boundaries. Further it should be differentiated from other approaches where the term ‘partnership’ might be used but where clearly there is a purchase of cooperation (see Hardy, Phillips and Lawrence, 2003 on this point). Many public-private partnerships would fit this description.

Thus, the question to consider becomes what partnership potential comes from working across boundaries? Will we be trapped into non-partnership approaches because of the constraints discussed in the enablers and barriers section; or can these be broken down to provide an enabling environment for the emergence of genuine partnering approaches (where appropriate)?

**Conclusion**

The primary purpose of this paper is to spark discussion in the *Working Across Boundaries: Value, Innovation and Partnership* panel. We draw on critical aspects of the panel from 2010 to move us forward from to consider how working across boundaries may drive value creation, innovation and how partnerships may be the product of, or mechanisms for, this mode of operating. From our base of four questions – what do we mean by working across boundaries; why has this emerged; what does working across boundaries involve; and how does it work (or not) – we extend our question to ask what the value, innovation and
partnership potential of working across boundaries is, and what the enablers and barriers to such developments are.

Our main aim has not been to answer these questions, nor to cover the entire field, but rather to provide a primer for thinking about these issues as we continue to examine the puzzles and tensions of working across boundaries.
References


