



Boundary Objects

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What is it?

Boundary objects refer to things or ideas simultaneously used by members of different groups, having different functions in each, yet similar enough to serve as a focus for exchange. Material objects frequently provide the focus of study, i.e., maps, timelines, collections, and these are used and interpreted differently by members of different communities. Most boundaries are social constructions, yet, even when understood as inventions, they have a tendency to become reified, appearing solid, even permanent. Similarities come to be ignored, and differences magnified. As a result, they are hard to ignore, difficult to cross, and at times nearly impossible to tear down. Boundary objects play a critical role by allowing members of different groups to find common ground and work together even prior to achieving consensus.

Who uses the concept?

Sociologists invented and have made the most use of the concept. Early adopters in other disciplines come from computer science, design, education, environmental studies, medicine, and even a few in organizational communication (with a focus on either intercultural collaboration or strategic ambiguity).

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

By definition, boundary objects are tools serving at least two masters at once. They are a mechanism of intersection, permitting coordination between members of different groups. All intercultural dialogues are *boundary encounters*, often requiring effort expended to develop concepts understood by all participants; boundary objects can make intercultural encounters just a little easier.

What work remains?

The closest the concept has gotten to intercultural dialogue to date is in a discussion of migration as a boundary object by Poehls, so much remains to be done. Most work using the concept has examined interdisciplinary or project-based collaborations, yet the same issues of needing coordination despite divergent assumptions arise in intercultural contexts. Exactly what can constitute a boundary object, and how boundary objects facilitate discussion prior to consensus, are questions worthy of exploration. A concept such as resilience, already studied as a boundary object in ecology, for example, should have as much to offer to an understanding of intercultural contexts.

Resources

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