

The Importance of Communication Among High School Psychology Educators

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"I am not a psychology major." This statement was racing through my head even as I was accepting the position of Advanced Placement Psychology teacher. I was awash in insecurity and doubt considering my own lack of background and expertise in this content area. I now realize from my many conversations with fellow high school educators that I am not isolated in this experience. Although the number of high school psychology students continues to grow (Ernst & Petrossian, 1996) it is not unusual for a high school psychology teacher to be the sole member of the "psychology department" in his or her school, usually nestled in the "Social Studies" department and usually teaching in more than one content area. So where does someone in this position go for support?

Soon after I accepted my current position, I met with my principal to discuss my teaching assignment. He wisely suggested that I contact a master psychology teacher in my school district. Desperate for direction, I quickly set about contacting her. This single act of reaching out to a colleague was a critical first step in shaping my psychology courses and in motivating the many activities in which I am currently involved. For new and experienced teachers alike, my advice is to break out of isolation! Find ways and find time to communicate with others. You will find your efforts will benefit your professional development and ultimately your students as well.

The following are some suggestions to establish lines of communication with other psychology educators.

Find Out Who's Out There

I recommend starting small. Find out who else is teaching psychology at your school. Find times where you can meet and map out what is being taught. Coordinate and share activities, topics, videos, and other projects. Start a psychology club together and

¹ Whitlock, K. H. (2002). The importance of communication among high school psychology educators. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001* (chap. 9). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

consider planning a "Psychology Awareness" Week for your school. By working together you can develop a solid and exciting psychology program that will attract students.

If you are a "lone wolf" at your school, call neighboring schools in your district and reach out to who is there. One of the projects we have implemented in our district is an In-service class for psychology teachers. We meet monthly to discuss recent successes, lesson ideas, and resources. These meetings are invaluable for experienced and novice teachers alike.

In addition, try to attend all conferences that are available and suitable for high school psychology teachers. Such meetings allow you to network with colleagues not only within your state but also with teachers throughout the country at all educational levels. One of my most valuable experiences was attending the NSF Psychology Institute, directed by Dr. Ludy Benjamin, at Texas A & M University. I also recommend attending the Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS) and Advanced Placement Conferences offered in your area. If you can afford to attend, the APA Convention and the National Institute for Teaching of Psychology (NITOP) are valuable as well.

If no such conferences are offered in your area or if the conferences mentioned are not an option, consider organizing one. It doesn't have to be on such a large scale. Start by inviting local teachers to your room after school and work from there. Contact your local university or state college to see if someone there is interested in working with you. Also, try contacting your state psychological association. Your efforts to build such networks with other psychology educators will not only benefit you but psychology education in your area.

Join TOPSS

I remember when I first learned of TOPSS at an Advanced Placement Conference. I was so excited to learn that the American Psychological Association had an organization devoted to the needs of the high school psychology teacher. I have found that the materials TOPSS provides, such as lesson plans, the "Psychology Teacher Network," the "The Monitor," to be very useful in my classroom.

A number of years ago I was asked to serve as the State Coordinator for TOPSS in Utah to spread the word about this valuable organization in my state and to increase communication among our teachers. In this role I have been able to meet and work with many psychology educators from different academic levels. Through this coordination we have created our own state organization called UTOPSS (Utah Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools). Many other states such as Nebraska, Kansas, Indiana, and Iowa have also created or are in the process of creating organizations such as ours. If your state does not have a local organization or if you are unsure if one exists or if you would like to get involved in the creation of such a group in your state, contact Rob McEntarffer, Member at Large for TOPSS. He manages the State Coordinator program. His email: rmcenta@lps.org. Rob would be happy to give you information.

UTOPSS' big project is a Fall Institute at the University of Utah. With the assistance of Dr. Irwin Altman, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of Utah, and Dr. Robert Hill, Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Utah and Member at Large for the Utah Psychological Association, and other members of UTOPSS, we have been able to offer very worthwhile experiences. Our participants have had opportunities to tour psychology laboratories at the University of Utah, meet with distinguished researchers, share teaching ideas and resources with master teachers, and collect materials that are immediately useful in the classroom. By far, however, the most valuable aspect of the conference is the chance to meet and network with other educators.

Last year UTOPSS experimented with a new method of communication. With the help of the Utah Educational Network (UEN), we formed a UTOPSS electronic discussion list. The list is designed to be an on-line, ongoing discussion group where teachers can ask questions, find lesson ideas and resources. There are many electronic discussion lists available for psychology educators. PsychNews and TIPS are an excellent way to contact educators across the country.

This year, UTOPSS launched its own website to promote communication among psychology educators. Teachers can access TOPSS resources, the National Standards for the Teaching of Introductory Psychology, information about ours and other available electronic discussion lists, and numerous online links for additional resources and information teachers can implement in their classroom. This page also includes links to websites from other high school psychology teachers. (Access page at: www.utopss.org)

The Challenge: Get Involved!

High School teachers are extremely busy people. Not only are teachers busy with planning, instruction, and management of a class (often with 30+ teenagers per class), they also spend a great deal of time with extracurricular responsibilities, committee assignments, and community and parental responsibilities. Balancing school work with home responsibilities often leaves little time for anything else. Even so, I encourage high school educators to find time to get involved. Don't be afraid to contact other teachers, go to available institutes or organize one of your own, join some electronic discussion lists, get online, and participate in TOPSS and other psychological associations. Such involvement can only benefit you. Thus even though you may not be "a psychology major," there are many available avenues to increase your communication with others in your profession and ultimately improve psychology education.

Reference

Ernst, R., & Petrossian, P. (1996). Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPPS): Aiming for excellence in high school psychology instruction. *American Psychologist*, 51, 256-258.