

## ***Planning a Regional Conference for Teachers of Psychology***

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Many psychologists, particularly those who work in the academy, are committed to studying educational processes for both applied and basic purposes. Although conscientious teachers of all stripes hope to make lasting, positive impressions on their students, psychologists are particularly well prepared not just to employ a variety of pedagogical techniques, but to assess their relative merits as well. It is because of our rigorous training in the scientific method, coupled with our disciplinary focuses in such areas as learning, memory, cognition, perception, language, and so on, that Ludy Benjamin (2002, 2003) raised the question: Why is psychology not the science of education?

Many psychologists are interested in learning how best to teach their subject matter and understand the fundamental processes that underlie optimal teaching and learning. One index of this level of interest is the number and variety of Internet-based discussion lists devoted to the teaching of psychology. These often include focused discussions on different sub-disciplines of psychology, as well as exchanges for teachers working at various educational levels (i.e., high school, college).

Another indicator of psychologists’ commitments and contributions to understanding educational processes is the number of teaching-related presentations at international, national, and regional psychology conferences. Although such conferences tend to be broadly focused opportunities to share all kinds of data, significant portions are reserved for exchanging data on and ideas about teaching. Moreover, there are several yearly events around the United States that are devoted entirely to teaching. For example, the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology has met annually for the last 26 years, and the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) holds a yearly meeting during the American Psychological Association conference. In addition, the STP Web site <<http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu>> lists 10 other meetings in North America and one in Europe that focus expressly on issues that are of interest to psychology teachers. However, if one of these conferences is not held in your area, you may wish to consider organizing one.

Conferences for teachers are energizing, provide useful ideas, and can help create a great network of dedicated teachers. Recognizing the continued need for a teaching conference in our region, we at Texas Lutheran University (TLU) hosted the Southwestern Teaching of Psychology conference (SWTOP) in the fall semesters of 2003 and 2004, and we will do so again in November of 2005.

This article describes the planning of a conference for teachers of psychology. It reflects ideas obtained while attending SWTOP over the last several years, as well as our recent experiences planning and hosting SWTOP. Depending on the availability of other similar opportunities in your area, you may wish to focus your conference on a particular cross-

section of psychology teachers (e.g., high school psychology teachers, teachers at private colleges and universities, graduate teaching assistants). The basic format that I will present has been successful in serving a blend of psychology teachers who work with students of all ages.

## Costs

First, it is important to know that the event does not have to be costly in order to be successful. Thankfully, there are many good psychologists who are committed to teaching and willing to help. They may be colleagues at other institutions who have teaching-related data and would be willing to present it. It is also common for people to share teaching demonstrations. If someone has a particularly good idea about how to address an issue of importance to teachers—technology, plagiarism, laboratory assignments, and so on—he or she could be invited to share. By welcoming both data based and non-data based presentations, you stand a greater chance of having a successful turnout at your meeting, making it more likely that you will cover the conference expenses and develop sufficient inertia to justify holding the meeting again.

However, rarely in life do things cost less than one anticipates, and the costs associated with hosting a teaching conference are no different. These include expenses for transportation, lodging, and meals for keynote speakers; printing and distribution of promotional materials (planners of SWTOP made exclusive use of email as a means of promoting the conference in recent years; this has met with mixed results, and we will again send printed fliers to psychology department chairs at regional institutions this year); food and beverage trays for use at registration times and during breaks; and miscellaneous other items such as name badges, poster mounting boards, and push pins. Therefore, it is imperative that you establish a detailed budget up front, drawing on the experiences of others who have hosted similar events.

Although certain costs are inevitable, some may be offset if you are able to get a publisher to underwrite part of the conference. A good way to approach this is by working through a publishing company representative, for example, one whose company publishes an introductory psychology textbook used on your campus. Because it is valuable for publishers to have access to teachers who might adopt their books, this relationship can be mutually beneficial. SWTOP has often benefited from publisher support. Last year, a publisher not only covered costs for the keynote speaker (transportation and lodging), it also covered the cost of an upscale reception.

There does not appear to be much additional extramural support available for covering the costs of teaching conferences. Aside from costs incurred by publishers, your only other revenue may well be conference registration fees. SWTOP has, in previous years, charged attendees close to \$100, but waived the fees for presenters. Although this attracted many presenters, it meant that other costs associated with the meeting had to be covered by non-presenting attendees. We opted two years ago to charge everyone regardless of whether he or she made a presentation, but we lowered the cost. We structured our costs such that college and university professors paid \$65, whereas everyone else (i.e., high school and junior college

teachers, graduate students) paid \$45. Because we did not have to cover costs for our keynote speaker, we ended up with a positive balance. This approach has been reasonably well received, and continues to be the means by which we cover costs associated with the meeting.

## Calendar

Planning the conference far ahead of time is a necessity. If you ask people to participate or commit to delivering featured presentations well in advance, they are probably more likely to agree. Also, depending on where you hold the event, planning ahead ensures that the particular rooms you wish to use will be available. Do not forget to reserve a reception room or area, a banquet room, and dining space, in addition to the rooms for the conference presentations. The format we have employed has included a mixture of smallish rooms for symposia and brief presentations, as well as a large room for plenary sessions. Securing the space necessary for these events cannot be done too early.

Food and lodging accommodations will require advanced planning as well. It may be financially advantageous to hold the event on a college or university campus, while arranging discounted room rates for participants at a nearby hotel. Depending on your institution's food service (both willingness to prepare meals for your attendees and the quality of what will be prepared), you may opt to have meals on campus or at the hotel. At TLU, we have used our campus food service for all meals. We are simply supplied with vouchers for use in the commons lines and asked to stagger our meal times to avoid the heaviest traffic times for students.

Additional considerations include the length and timing of the event, and whether it will occur on a weekday or weekend. Several issues merit attention when determining when and for how long to hold the event. These include (a) whether attendees are willing to miss classes to attend, (b) whether attendees will attend on a weekend, (c) whether institutional rooms can be made available on week days and/or weekends, (d) costs of lodging and transportation that fluctuate as a function of day of the week, and (e) the schedule of other professional events. Attendance at SWTOP has been best when the event is a 2-day, Friday-Saturday event.

## Format Considerations

Psychologists are accustomed to attending and participating in professional conferences that include invited addresses, symposia, posters, and oral paper presentations. Likewise, this format is appropriate for a teaching conference. Sometimes people will organize symposia on their own and submit plans after a call for proposals. In addition, there is no shame in asking people to work with others who share interest in a given topic. Likewise, asking colleagues to make individual presentations is also an effective way of assuring that you not only get a longer program, but one with a variety of topics.

One addition to the standard format of larger meetings, which is perfectly appropriate at teaching conferences, is a session devoted to teaching demonstrations. When SWTOP was held on the campus of Texas Wesleyan University, the traditional closing session was a plenary session on effective teaching demonstrations called "Live from Fort Worth." The use

of demonstrations can spark ideas for pedagogical research as well as ideas for the development of new demonstrations. Beginning teachers are especially appreciative of these sessions as they provide new ways of adding diversity to their daily teaching plans.

#### Final Note

Although it takes a tremendous amount of work to organize such an event, planning a successful conference can be very rewarding. Draw on whatever resources you can as you embark on this meaningful activity. By the time you have made arrangements for the use of space, preparation and serving of meals, delivery of multi-media equipment, and so on, you will likely have enlisted the help of people including custodial and food service staff, the registrar, your faculty colleagues, and highly motivated students wishing to contribute to the event's success.

There is no better teacher than experience. If you sense that psychologists at institutions in your area would welcome a teaching conference, go for it! Keep good notes on how you managed the tasks, and by all means seek evaluative feedback. The "regulars" at SWTOP have elected for a pattern whereby a given institution hosts the conference for a couple of years in a row before handing it over to others. The greater the number of people interested in supporting the conference, the more success you will have each year.

Finally, if you wish, please visit our conference Web site to track the development of the 2005 SWTOP conference. The URL is  
<<http://www.tlu.edu/academics/psychology/conference/swtop.html>>

#### References

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