

Learning through Professional Partnerships

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(This essay originally appeared as the monthly “E-xcellence in Teaching” e-column on the *PsychTeacher*TM *Electronic Discussion List* in March 2006.)

If I knew then what I know now, what would I have done differently? I would have more proactively sought out partnerships to expand my perspective and increase the quality of my productivity. The purpose of this essay is to show that partnerships promote learning through exposure to different perspectives, the synthesis of which often results in new ideas and insights. Because outstanding teachers work diligently to learn, and because partnerships are potentially excellent opportunities to learn, quality teaching is enhanced through partnerships. Whether the partnership is defined as collaboration, collegiality, committee work, or something else, becoming partners means working in an environment that promotes the open exchange of ideas to achieve a common goal. Examples of productive professional partnerships abound. They can range from committees that meet infrequently, such as search committees, to lifelong partnerships, for example, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky’s extensive collaboration on bounded rationality (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Kahneman captured this collaboration best in his 2002 Nobel Prize address, in which he paid homage to his deceased partner (see <http://nobelprize.org/economics/laureates/2002/kahneman-lecture.html>).

In June 1999, the National Forum on Psychology Partnerships (also referred to as the Psychology Partnerships Project or P3) convened for 5 days on the campus of James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Participants included 6 current or recent graduate students, 5 teachers from predominantly graduate-level programs, 23 high school teachers, 19 community college teachers, 42 college/university teachers from predominantly undergraduate programs, and 4 psychologists from other professional settings. The forum’s purpose was to “bring psychology teachers from all academic levels together to discuss critical issues in education and to design projects that would facilitate the development of partnerships across academic levels to address those issues” (Society for the Teaching of Psychology, 1999). These invited participants from across the nation worked on one of nine issues: advising, assessment, curriculum, diversity, faculty development, partnerships, research, service learning, and technology.

Attending the forum was my first opportunity to collaborate with teachers from different levels of education. Listening and responding to different perspectives about assessment, the issue on which my group focused, was fascinating, informative, and useful. The assessment group generated and shaped a variety of ideas that I doubt members working individually would have produced. These ideas eventually resulted in the 2002 Best Practices in Assessment conference; an edited book based on the conference proceedings (Dunn, Mehrotra, & Halonen, 2004), which *Choice* magazine, a periodical of the American Library Association, selected as an Outstanding Academic Title for 2005; and the scientific rubric for learning, teaching, and assessing scientific inquiry in psychology (Halonen et al., 2003). In these cases, the whole was definitely greater than the sum of its parts.

In my home state of Kansas, partnerships were crucial to reinstating psychology as a separate endorsement area for high school teachers. From 1991 to 2001, the education community in Kansas debated how best to redefine the endorsement areas for teacher licensure. For most of those 10 years, the state department of education proposed that social studies subsume psychology, a change that would drastically reduce the preparation of high school psychology teachers. Initially, I contacted members of the Kansas State Board of Education (KSBE) and spoke at KSBE's monthly meetings, advocating removing psychology from social studies and making it a separate endorsement. My initial efforts were unsuccessful. However, upon returning from the national forum in 1999, I started partnering with high school psychology teachers, community college teachers, college/university teachers, members of the Kansas Psychological Association, and leaders of the American Psychological Association (APA) to promote the importance of psychology as a separate endorsement area. In conjunction with the newly-approved National Standards for the Teaching of High School Psychology, now titled the National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula (<http://www.apa.org/ed/natlstandards.html>), these partnering efforts ultimately produced success (Weaver, 2002). Within a year, psychology was removed from social studies and made its own endorsement area, and I gained valuable information from my partners and learned a valuable lesson on the efficacy of partnerships.

Partnering now infuses much of what I do. As department chair, I view my relationships with faculty as partnerships that help promote the professional development of students. My administrative philosophy is based on familiarity with faculty, students, issues internal and external to the department, and constituencies affecting the department. That familiarity results from collaborating on teaching, scholarship, service, curriculum, student organizations, assessment, and other activities.

The development of Kansas Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (KTOPSS), now planning its twelfth annual workshop, is another example of a valued partnership. With high school teachers from across the state, I have worked on a variety of initiatives, including sponsoring the annual workshop, expanding the network of high school psychology teachers in the state, and promoting the professional identity of high school psychology teachers.

What initially prompted this essay was the following question: "If I knew then what I know now, what would I have done differently?" Given the importance of professional partnerships, how might a new faculty member develop partnerships? How might an experienced faculty member develop partnerships? Here are some tips, none of them novel, for fostering partnerships:

1. During meetings of any kind, have group members adopt rules that provide for the open exchange of ideas. Forming strong partnerships requires that the partners are comfortable expressing themselves.
2. Become a student organization advisor and develop partnerships with student leaders. Collaborating with student leaders promotes their student professional development, sustains the department's community, develops productive citizens, and produces loyal alumni.

3. Call local high school, community college, or college/university psychology teachers to establish connections. These partnerships embrace many aspects of the discipline, including research, teaching, recruitment, and retention.
4. Establish or participate in a focus group. Listening to other members' observations can inform one's understanding on a number of issues.
5. Become involved with a professional organization beyond just being a member. Such partnerships expand one's breadth of the discipline.
6. Become involved with the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP; Division 2 of APA); opportunities abound in this organization. Readers of this essay care for issues relevant to teaching. Involvement with STP connects one with others who share that priority.
7. Serve on the planning committee for a conference or convention (see Bailey, 2004). Melding committee members' ideas into a coherent framework is very satisfying.
8. Invite colleagues to lunch. Familiarity forms the basis of partnerships, and conversing during a meal is one way to "find common ground."
9. Seek out colleagues and students with whom you can collaborate on research. Research collaborations nurture the closeness on which strong partnerships are based.
10. Say "yes" when asked to become involved (but be sure you know what you are saying yes to). By definition, a partnership requires at least two people; saying "yes" puts people together.
11. Subscribe to a listserv or discussion list and become part of a virtual community of learners. This connection may seem a bit flimsy for a partnership, but I am a better teacher because of the ideas presented on the PsychTeacherTM discussion list.
12. Recognize that strong partnerships require members who can "agree to disagree." The bonds of a strong partnership are flexible, and disagreement is a natural consequence of sharing ideas.
13. Supervise field experiences. Partnering with students and field supervisors to provide optimal practicum or internship experiences requires triangulating three different sets of priorities.
14. Use the Student Input Team process as a formative evaluation in your courses (see <http://www.emporia.edu/psyspe/SIT.htm> for procedures). Engaging one's students in discussing one's course produces a better course.
15. Team-teach a course. If one learns the material best by teaching, such learning is magnified when collaborating with other faculty.

Conclusion

It is not a given that any group is, or will become, a partnership. Although my view on partnerships is expansive, a quality partnership promotes learning through exposure to different perspectives, the synthesis of which results in new ideas and insights. Allowing different perspectives to emerge requires openness and tolerance. My involvement in partnerships has been both professionally and personally maturing and rewarding.

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