An Adventure in Learning about Communication for Partnerships

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Developing the Partnerships journal has been a learning adventure! At first, a small team considered ways to create a high-quality publication on a minimal budget with limited staff support. The goal was to create a journal that shared scholarship on community-campus partnerships reflecting multiple disciplines and diverse situations.

Because of the hard work of many, Partnerships has become well-known and respected. So, in this final issue, let me highlight a few observations about scholarship on partnerships as we continue on our collective journey to make our communities better for all.

Back in 2009, when I served as the first Book Review Editor, scholarly writing on campus-community partnerships was rare. Finding books “on” partnerships was a challenge, so instead we chose books that would be useful to partners!

That void no longer exists. As an Editorial Board member, I’ve been thrilled to see how many different ways partnerships work well! Now, scholars, teachers, community practitioners, university staff, administrators and students representing multiple disciplines/backgrounds regularly write, present and offer workshops focused on community/civic engagement partnerships worldwide.

Scholars representing communication—my discipline—have often applied expertise about dyadic, group, intercultural, and interorganizational communication to partnerships. My own scholarly work has increasingly identified interpersonal communication processes/practices that can help community-campus partnerships.

Regardless of what types of service-learning or civic engagement are involved, “partners rely on communication to share information and to achieve tasks together” (Dumlao, 2018, p. 24). That’s because communication, at its essence, is about creating meaning in different contexts. That is, “people do not simply send meaning from one to the other and then back again; rather they build shared meaning” through simultaneous sending and receiving (West and Turner, 2020, p. 14).

The “best” partnership communication is complex and situation specific. So, learning practices/processes for competent communication with diverse people in varied settings is necessarily an on-going endeavor. Sometimes we fall short and misunderstandings happen, but continuing to learn and practice better communication is crucial to our overall success as we address contemporary community issues with others.

This essay includes seven tips for partner communication, highlights communication resources, and shares my Collaborative Communication Framework. My hope is that readers will take away information and put it to use. Please consider reaching out to the scholars/practitioners listed as well.
Seven Tips for Partner Communication

1. Mindfully listening involves ears, eyes, sensing and engaging one’s heart toward the other. Mindful listening is key to learning more about the partner and the collaborative work you will do together.

Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) point out that “ting (the Chinese word for listening) means attending ‘mindfully with our ears, eyes, and a focused heart’ to the sounds, tone, gestures, movements, nonverbal nuances, pauses and silence” (p. 199) that we witness. Mindful listening can help us be flexible and change our understandings as new information comes into our awareness.

West and Turner (2020) offer the “P-A-C-T” template to describe four listening styles, “predominant listening approach(es) to the messages we receive” (p. 176). People-centered listening zeros in on other people’s feelings and emotions. People-centered listeners quickly notice other’s moods and tend to compromise and find common areas of interest. They also tend to provide clear verbal and nonverbal feedback. Action-centered listening is focused on message content that is very well organized, concise and error-free. Action-centered listeners question assumptions underlying a message if it seems false; they may also develop an alternate more realistic explanation. These listeners tend to want unambiguous feedback. Content-centered listening is focused on facts and details. Content-centered listeners consider all sides of an issue and welcome complex challenging information. These listeners often serve as “devil’s advocates,” asking pointed questions or discounting information that seems to be from a nonexpert source. Time-centered listening is focused on constraints and guidelines for the length of the conversations. Time-centered listeners start a conversation by stating the amount of time available to talk and discourage wordy explanations from others.

West and Turner (2020) note that none of these listening styles are “right” or “wrong.” Rather, tendencies for a particular style are often based upon cultural or experience backgrounds. In addition, a single conversation may require all the kinds of listening depending on the purpose of the conversation and the situation. So, understanding the listening styles can help us be flexible when listening to help us learn more and, hopefully, to better meet our partner’s needs.

2. Partnership thinking involves attention to the relationship (the “we”) as well as to the individual partner’s needs and concerns (the “me”) in order to reach beyond both. Phillips and Wood (1983) use the term “dual perspective” for attending to and understanding our own and our partner’s perspectives, beliefs, thoughts, or feelings. We can gain information by considering “dual perspectives” as we shape communication that serves the partnership and our joint work well.

Partnership thinking makes us shift back and forth seamlessly between what one thinks and feels toward what another might think or feel (Phillips and Wood, 1983). Using this kind of thinking takes practice in listening, hearing and understanding where the other person is coming from and holding that in mind even while you are aware of your own perspectives (Dumlao, 2018).
Importantly, Kare Anderson (2014, September), an award-winning journalist points out that a “mutuality mindset” can enable people to “speak sooner to the strongest sweet spot of shared interest.” Anderson has created an influential series of books and articles built around the ideas of “mutuality” and becoming “opportunity makers” for others. (See her ground-breaking TED talk at: https://www.ted.com/talks/kare_anderson_be_an_opportunity-maker.)

Notably, most service-learning and civic engagement work requires the expertise and experience of each person involved (the me) as well as the collective (the we) in order to solve complex problems. Issues like divergent student access to education, changing business environments, health disparities, crime, inequalities among groups, environmental challenges and much more (Boyer, 1994; Fitzgerald, et al., 2010; Seigal, 2010) require both individual expertise and experiences as well as collective efforts.

3. Conflict happens between people, so how it is managed is what matters most. Many of us may habitually think of conflict as abnormal or to be avoided, but those assumptions can prove counter-productive to having well-functioning partnerships and collaborating well. Tensions and conflicts happen in all relationships as people work to understand different perspectives and to gather information about how their institutions or cultures may work, for instance.

Also, those community engagement professionals that span boundaries across differences (whether interpersonal, organizational, cultural, or from another source) can face “tensions and conflict directly, or they may support, mediate, or facilitate faculty, staff, students, and community partners experiencing conflict” (Janke & Dumlao, 2019, pp. 20-21). Interestingly enough though, struggles and conflicts often point us toward changes that are needed.

Hocker and Wilmot (2014) point out that communication creates conflict, reflects conflict, and is the means for productive or destructive management of conflict (p. 14). “We use communication to express struggles, to describe details from our own perspective, to learn from one another, to generate workable responses, and to cocreate change” (Dumlao, 2018, pp. 118–119).

Matyók and Kellett (2017) call communication “the primary praxis of nonviolent conflict transformation and peacebuilding” (p. xi). I agree. “Conflict handled well can promote peace, build greater understanding, and create positive change in our communities” (Dumlao, 2018, p. 118).

That’s not to say that conflict management or transformation is easy. Instead it can be complex, messy, and create friction despite our best intentions. It takes courage, practice and commitment to take a partnership approach to conflict, especially when differences require us to suspend judgments to listen mindfully despite our emotional or other reactions in the “heat of the moment.”

Thankfully, there are many resources to help with conflict management that can be applied to community-campus partnerships. (Cress et al.’s (2013) service-learning guidebook offers suggestions as does our article about conflict management as a required competency for community engagement professionals (Janke & Dumlao,
Additional sources include: Dumlao, 2018; Dumlao & Janke, 2012; Reimer, et al., 2015; St. Amant, 2017; and Stone et al., 2010. Or, for a quick four-step method for responding to conflicts try Kare Anderson’s (1999) round-trip approach. Or consider Stone et al.’s (2010) easy-to-read but well-researched book on holding learning conversations.

4. Connect more deeply through shared interests and passions.
Connecting through verbal and nonverbal communication is fundamental in partnerships. I think of connecting as the “home base” for partners to let go of outside influences in order to communicatively bond with one another. “When we connect well, we offer information that matters to our partner and show that we care about him or her not just on the work we do together” (Dumlao, 2018, p. 44). Indeed, connecting well can serve as relational glue to hold us together. Working to reconnect can be invaluable when we face challenges or tensions.

Interestingly enough, Bringle et al. (2009) argue convincingly that the term “partnerships” should be applied to relationships that possess closeness, equity, and integrity. All three qualities, but especially closeness, are more likely when partners repeatedly reach deep interpersonal connections repeatedly over time.

Connecting initially can involve self-disclosures about oneself or one’s abilities, expertise or even organizational background that the other partner may not know or be able to observe. Partners can also develop quick ways to connect, based on their shared experiences. (For more, see the Collaborative Communication Framework later in this article.)

5. True commitment to relationship-building (not just to the tasks to be done) takes time and ongoing energy. Unlike television shows, movies, or books that develop relationships relatively quickly, relationship-building in real life requires work! One good conversation will never be enough to accommodate changes of individuals and their life situations that will impact a partnership.

Commitments that impact partners can be complicated. Commitments happen between the partners themselves. Community and organizational priorities and commitments impact partners, too. It’s useful, therefore, to think of commitments as choices that lay a foundation of expectations between partners and can change at times, too.

Commitment experiences by partners relates closely to trust. Reina and Reina (2006) worked with 100 organizations to develop their trust and betrayal model. They identify three distinct types of trust: contractual trust, communication trust, and competence trust. Contractual trust involves developing “a mutual understanding that people in the relationship will do what they say they will do” (p. 16). Communication trust has to do with the willingness to disclose, tell the truth, and speak “with good purpose” among other qualities that help enhance each partner’s credibility as related to the relationship. Competence trust involves a “trust of capability” (p. 58).

Each type of trust can impact the level of commitment and dedication that partners will enact in their shared work. When trust is badly damaged or partners feel betrayed by ineffective communication or actions, repair work may be needed to reestablish a positive relational climate and mutual positive regard. This repair work can involve
metacommunication (i.e. communicating about communication). Repair work can also involve difficult learning conversations about what happened, feelings that came up, or identity concerns that need to be addressed (See Stone et al., 2010, for more about difficult conversations.)

6. Celebrate partner successes to build a common history and to stockpile good feelings for rough times. Sustainable partnerships have a past, a present, and the hope for a future together. Celebrating successes and milestones can be powerful ways to recognize and energize partners on their collective journey of change.

Celebrating partner successes can be considered a type of positive communication that can help build long-term relationships (see Socha and Pitts, 2012). Practical ways to celebrate successes include: creating artwork together, using music and sound to involve community members, developing webinars or short videos to share, writing experiences and perspectives into stories, and more. This part of our communication work can bring out creativity that reinvigorates partnerships and brings information about partnerships out into the community.

7. Sometimes in-depth conversations or dialogues are needed to learn more and for partners to move forward together. Powerful techniques for promoting positive dialogues between divergent groups have been compiled by Longo and Shaeffer (2019). Their book includes a variety of dialogue and deliberation models for holding tough conversations between groups in “safe spaces” that are humanizing, authentic and productive. Then, “ordinary people can share experience, associate and organize, participate in public decision-making, and plan for collective action” (p.15).

For instance, Spoma Jovanovic’s (2019) work with the Conversations that Matter course shows how students can be encouraged to “read and discuss issues in the news to help make them interesting conversation partners and unafraid to ask questions about what matters in the world” (p. 178). Students can then be guided to attend campus and community meetings, to do related research and finally to facilitate conversations “that keep people on all sides of the issues talking together for the purpose of organizing for action” (p.178).

Another approach to group and organizational conversations can be found in the book by Heath and Isbell (2017). These book authors consider the complexities of communication (including dialogue) and ethics involved in interorganizational collaboration. They detail related challenges and offer in-depth examples of how such collaborations have worked in different contexts.

**The Collaborative Communication Framework and Partnerships**

My own Collaborative Communication Framework (2018) focuses on partnerships at the most basic level of interaction— between two people as they work toward common goals. “To be collaborative, interpersonal communication must be grounded in a partnership mindset” (Dumlao, 2018, p. 41).

A useful definition for collaboration is: the set of communication practices that promote a relational perspective, showing respect and openness to the partner along with his or her unique contributions and view. With collaborative communication, new
possibilities can be created for the partnership itself and for partners’ joint work in the community.

My collaborative communication framework builds on this definition and was developed to help partners make choices as they navigate their on-going relationship. Five elements make up the framework: connecting, conversing, envisioning, committing, and partner patterns. All five are needed to foster the highest quality partnership work, though the elements don’t necessarily follow any particular sequence.

**Collaborative Communication Framework**

**Connecting** involves communication to find common ground and establish rapport. Deeper connecting tends to infuse energy and passion in addition to sharing factual thoughts. Partners may connect in many different ways, so it’s wise to observe and ask questions rather than to assume that the other connects just like we do.

**Conversing** involves interactive dialogue that creates an exchange between partners to share information or explore ideas. Sometimes conversing involves sharing information that is not obvious, other times conversing involves clarifying information or considering differences of opinion or varied perspectives.

While conversing may seem to be “all verbal,” it’s not. Nonverbal information like facial expressions, posture, vocal characteristics, touch, physical distance, use of time and more can modify, supplement or even contradict verbal information (i.e. creating mixed messages). Nonverbal information tends to demonstrate our feelings, signify who we
are, reflect distinctions in power, and carry cultural information. So nonverbals are vital to consider when conversing with partners.

**Envisioning** is the important work of dreaming about and then describing what’s possible for a community as well as crystallizing those possibilities in communication between and among partners. Bold possibilities for the future may be expressed first verbally and later captured through drawings or other symbolic representations.

Envisioning also involves drilling down from those ideas to communicate specific action steps. In reality, envisioning can be seen as cyclical with partners sharing their creative visions, then developing action steps, then reconsidering the vision and so on until workable plans are developed to create a new reality.

**Committing** refers to reaching agreements between partners about roles, responsibilities, relationship specifics to include ways the partnership will work. Committing involves “communication at multiple levels—between partners, organizations and the communities they serve” (p. 48). At the dyadic level, committing involves both words and actions that help built trust between partners in various ways.

**Partner patterns** represent the communication practices and guidelines developed uniquely between two or more partnerships. These verbal and nonverbal patterns create unique meanings that help develop a shared past and present between people. Partner patterns also can provide a base to work together in the future as well.

The collaborative communication framework intentionally encompasses the basic community engagement values of mutuality, reciprocity, shared power, ethical awareness, and cultural sensitivity. Ideally, partners will be able to enact those values while communicating and working together collaboratively.

Full collaboration doesn’t always work though because of various unavoidable constraints. Even so, the Collaborative Communication Framework can help guide partner discussions as they make choices about their work. (For more information, examples and applications of the Collaboration Communication Framework, see Dumlao, 2018).

As I finish this essay —like most of you— I must stay close to home due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. This situation makes collaborative communication—whether via email, video or audio conferencing, or via phone, Facebook or Skype—a reality that we can no longer ignore.

The tips offered and Collaborative Communication Framework shared here can still be helpful no matter how we work together. I look forward to seeing new possibilities and insights as we continue to collaborate to make positive differences in our communities and our world.

**References**


