

Bridging Differences into Strengths

Strategies for Celebrating Uniqueness and Empathetic Education

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Abstract

It has been suggested that collaborative research often involves bridging divides that may exist between academics, practitioners, and community agencies. The purpose of this article is to outline strategies we find beneficial for negotiating spaces where everyone involved has some claim as an expert. Our goal is to provide examples of specific behaviors we have adopted to bridge differences into strengths throughout our projects. Our ability to work together has been peppered with many experiences that have taught us to practice two key strategies: celebrating our uniqueness and empathetically educating others and ourselves.

Keywords: *Recreation, advocacy, engagement, relationship building, empathy*

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This article provides strategies learned from years of experience and countless conversations about practices for bridging differences between practitioners and academics. Between the two authors we have multiple degrees in recreation and have partnered on many practitioner, academic, community and blended projects. One of us is an assistant professor who identifies more as a researcher; the other identifies more as a practitioner and serves as a liaison between recreation agencies and academics at a large Midwest university. Through the years we have had the opportunity to study together as graduate students, to research together as colleagues, and to serve on various professional committees advocating for recreation. Our ability to form strong partnerships with community agencies has been peppered with many experiences that have taught us to practice two strategies: celebrating our uniqueness and empathetically educating others and ourselves. Celebrating our uniqueness requires us to recognize differences in the ways that we have been trained and perceive the every day realities of our positions. Empathetic education involves demonstrating a level of respect for and interest in the knowledge, language, perspectives, and experiences that make each partners' position unique. When we speak of empathetic education we are including all the processes through which knowledge is transmitted in ways that do not limit or assume the capacity of others for mastering concepts.

Recreation agencies and academic departments face financial and social challenges that cannot be solved by research or practice alone. In order to more effectively advocate for recreation, we must recognize that our success is determined by our abilities to work together. Our academic departments need help in recruiting students; our recreation agencies need data to empirically demonstrate the impact they have on the health of individuals and communities; and, both are asked to justify their existence in a world that undervalues the importance of recreation to individual and community well-being. Rather than attempting to solve these challenges in isolation, integrating the strengths of academics and practitioners to bridge gaps in training and experience better facilitates opportunities for shared success. Successful partnerships involve understanding not only the goals of the project, but also the benefits and costs to those involved. As Chase and Masberg (2008) noted, "If a partnership is to work, there must be benefits to all parties" (p. 75). A foundational belief we share is that most practitioners and academics believe recreation is integral to the health of individuals and communities.

Another is that those engaged in supporting recreation are in some ways academics, practitioners, and community advocates. Rather than easily fitting into one role or the other, we believe those engaged in advocacy, through teaching, research and/or service working with communities, regularly serve as both practitioner and researcher to different levels in varying contexts. Responsibilities and job descriptions blur during interactions between academics, practitioners, and community advocates. Solutions to today's problems require more than trained experts; they require knowledgeable involvement from participants capable of practicing interpersonal and soft skills in order to succeed (Andrews, Newman, Meadows, Cox, & Bunting, 2010; Chase & Masberg, 2008; Hurd, 2005).

With all of this in mind, the purpose of this article is to outline strategies we find beneficial for negotiating partnerships where everyone involved has valuable expertise; our goal is to provide examples of specific behaviors we utilize to celebrate uniqueness and practice empathetic education. Rather than an exhaustive literature review or situating our anecdotal experiences as generalizable to all encounters, we have chosen to share vignettes we believe represent common experiences. To set the stage, our agency had been contracted

to do research for a statewide association advocating for increasing the number of and funding for trails in our state. The first author was completing his doctoral studies and serving as a research assistant tasked with overseeing the data collection, analysis and preparation of a final report. The second author was serving as the coordinator of the office hired to complete the work and as the primary liaison between the agency and the researcher. Both of us had met with the agency and participated in the crafting of a questionnaire administered by the agency's volunteers. The first vignette is used to demonstrate lessons we learned related to celebrating our uniqueness.

Celebrating our Uniqueness

Author One: Okay, as soon as I hear from IRB, I'll get the data collection started.

Author Two: Well, the agency would like to have the results by the end of June.

Author One: That shouldn't be a problem, but I want to make sure we have IRB approval in case we can publish something out of this.

Author Two: We are going to publish something. We're going to publish a report.

Author One: Yeah, I meant something that mattered. It doesn't really help any of us to publish the report. We need IRB approval to publish in a journal.

Author Two: Sounds good, but does publishing in the journal help the agency?

Author One: No, but this is a lot of work to just make an agency report.

Author Two: But they're the one paying us.

Author One: Yep, I get that. I'll get done what they need, but we need publications, too.

Author Two: Alright. Let me know when you hear from IRB.

The stark reality is that practitioners and academics negotiate structural challenges that divide them. It is uncommon for graduating doctoral students to not have been inculcated with a "publish or perish" mindset, or for practitioners to not have negotiated "The customer is always right" expectations. In our experience, graduate studies did not prepare us for working with the public so much as navigating the bureaucracy of research and publication. It also seems that practitioners rarely receive training, other than the latest marketing and promotion trends, on best practices for conducting research and evaluations. Simplistically stated, through our trainings we are taught two different jargons, promoted based on different successes, and rarely motivated to work with the other by the institutional practices that govern our employment.

Rather than positioning these differences as negative, we suggest that they must be acknowledged and negotiated. Collaborative projects need not be viewed as benefitting one more than the other, but instead designed to be beneficial to everyone involved. We have learned through our experiences, like the vignette noted above, that celebrating our uniqueness at the beginning of the project is one way to facilitate success.

As part of celebrating our uniqueness, we make sure that our first conversations involve clearly outlining three issues: timelines, external pressures, and data use. Academics and practitioners often have different schedules that affect their timelines for projects. It is worth noting that many practitioners are busiest during the summer and holiday breaks when many academics may not be as busy teaching classes and attending required meetings. Oftentimes academics are interested in publishing findings in peer-reviewed journals and

must be mindful of the time required to navigate Institutional Review Board (IRB) policies while practitioners may need data by a given date for inclusion in specific conferences, community hearings, or publications. From the beginning, academics and practitioners must be clear in matching their goals to the timelines required to achieve them.

Practitioners and academics also must explain the unique pressures they are expected to negotiate throughout the project. Working on a project together blends the roles of practitioner, researcher, and advocate; however, pressures do differ. Practitioners may be asked by their communities to justify research processes. This is especially true when resource allocation is being affected by not only empirical evidence but also by public opinion. Evidence-based decisions may require practitioners and academics to partner in educating communities. Academics and practitioners co-facilitating town hall meetings where findings and implications are discussed is one way this can be achieved. Similarly, practitioners may need to assist academics in convincing department chairs, deans, and funding agencies about the importance of research to local communities.

It is also important to recognize that practitioners may be more invested in and affected by findings that emerge than the academics. We were forced to negotiate these realities several times when findings did not support claims desired by the agency, and when one of us wanted to ask questions that were not seen as directly related to the agency's goals. Oftentimes, additional research goals were not necessarily in line with the agency concerns that were more focused on front-line interactions with clients. To use an analogy often used by our graduate advisor, as academics we were focused on issues from a 50,000-foot view when the agency was concerned about what was happening at ground level. Recreation agencies are being asked, or being forced, to take cuts in funding, but still provide high-quality services. Their use of resources and effectiveness in provision of services are closely scrutinized. Results of any study will have a lasting impact on employment, funding, and public support. It is inevitable that some results will be perceived as negative by the practitioner and public. Academics may look at data as black and white, but in order to facilitate successful partnerships it is important to present results empathetically. Similarly, practitioners may resist academic endeavors to research communities simply for the publication of an article that they perceive will have no meaningful impact in improving the lives of their stakeholders. Facilitating discussions about external pressures and how they will be negotiated from the beginning minimizes the chances of a project being derailed when challenges do emerge.

Another issue that must be addressed from the start of a project is how the data will be utilized. Through years of working together, we have developed an appreciation for how empirical evidence can be employed in a variety of forms and formats to advocate for recreation opportunities. A strategy we have learned is explaining to agencies that, "Negative can be okay.... it can speak to needs or reasons for change." Explaining to agencies from the beginning that data can be used to formulate a wide variety of arguments has benefitted our projects greatly. Through our experiences we have learned success is more likely when we make it standard practice to include these discussions in our initial interactions with agencies. We set realistic timelines, acknowledge our external pressures, and plan how resulting data will be utilized. By discussing these issues we are able to appreciate the uniqueness of our roles in the process and affirm our shared goal of advocating for recreation.

While these practices help build solid foundations, it is also necessary to maintain the process from beginning to end. We have found that empathetically educating others

and ourselves throughout the process facilitates greater success than simply operating in solitude or acquiescing to the other's expertise. We believe collaboration is praxis through which everyone involved gains experience and knowledge. As the following vignette suggests, even after the uniqueness of each of our roles has been acknowledged, it is still necessary to practice empathetically educating one another.

Empathetically Educating Others and Ourselves

Author Two: I talked to Joe (agency coordinator); he said he needs the median average total spending of the trail users to share with one of the legislators.

Author One: The what? Does he need the median or does he need the average?

Author Two: He said the median average.

Author One: I can't get that. Those are two different things.

Author Two: Apparently another report had that.

Author One: Is it the same kind of study? Do you know which report?

Author Two: No, do you want me to find that?

Author One: No, I'll call him. I have no idea how I'm going to get a median average from one data set, so maybe he's just using the wrong words.

Author Two: Remember, he's not a PhD.

Learning to speak the jargon of a particular field is important. It allows one to fit into the community to which they are attempting to belong. We have learned that, as advocates, we belong to multiple communities and need fluency in each. Practitioners and academics are trained to speak different jargons, but by working cooperatively they can develop understandings of both. Academic journals require different language than town meetings and legislative lobbying. A strength of practitioner and academic partnerships is their capacity to speak to and influence multiple audiences. Celebrating uniqueness allows partners to recognize the value of each audience. Empathic education allows partners to teach each other how to communicate across jargon barriers. Chase and Masberg (2008) argued that "Given three factors: an increasingly demanding consumer, management's well-meaning but sometimes obtrusive customer service policies, and the myriad ways to communicate today, the importance of sophisticated, highly developed interpersonal skills for front-line personnel cannot be overstated" (p. 88). We argue that these interpersonal skills are just as important for partnerships as they are for front-line employees. Through our experiences, we have learned to employ three interpersonal practices that we believe facilitate empathetic education: recognize everyone involved is there for a reason, listen before talking, and clarify meanings.

Academics, practitioners, and community advocates have all argued for the importance of recognizing various voices throughout collaborative process. A starting point for appreciating someone else's feelings is asking questions. As people become involved in collaborative processes it is helpful to ask them what motivated them to be involved. It is helpful to ask them what they understand to be the issues involved in the project and to situate themselves within those issues. There are many ways that people can be involved in recreational advocacy; knowing why they have chosen to be involved in a particular project allows for better understandings of ways they want to be included. By recognizing

that everyone involved is there for a reason we have been better able to work through those moments of frustration that are inevitable when working across resource and language barriers.

Listening before talking was a hard lesson for the first author to learn. Throughout graduate studies academics are inculcated with terms and concepts. We are taught to express our understandings through the use of these terms and are expected to discuss worldviews in terms of ontologies, ways of thinking as epistemologies, and ethics as axiology (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). By his own admission, the first author has been guilty of taking these terms into meetings where an agency representative has looked at him as though he was speaking a foreign language. Rather than talking and trying to teach, he has learned the importance of asking others to provide examples or share stories in order to help us better appreciate exactly what they are describing and/or desiring. Through conversations between the authors, we have developed a deep appreciation for each other's trainings. Oftentimes these conversations include moments when the first author has to ask someone to "walk him through" what the other is envisioning. We have learned enough of each other's languages and experiences to empathetically speak and question one another. Through this process, everyone involved learns. We have learned that taking the time to listen to what the other is describing moves a project forward far more successfully than does demanding that others speak our language.

Lastly, we have learned the value of clarifying meanings. At the simplest level, this means clarifying definitions. The vignette provided the authors an opportunity to clarify with a practitioner the differences between averages, medians and how data is analyzed to reach them. At another level, it involved clarifying the meanings of the project to us. To what degree is educating one another and the community a part of the collaboration? In some projects we have worked with agencies very interested in learning more about the philosophical and methodological considerations of the project; in others, the goal has been collecting and analyzing data to provide talking points for advocacy efforts. Empathetic education does not involve forcing others to learn as a condition of the collaboration; it involves providing respectful spaces where education can be facilitated. It is not a one-way process; rather, it involves everyone involved learning from one another.

Bridging the divide between practitioners and academics is not impossible. Successful projects have demonstrated this to be true. Structural policies and differences in training often lead to challenges in working together, but those involved can make deliberate choices to engage in strategies to bridge the divide. We believe that celebrating our uniqueness from the beginning and practicing empathetic education throughout the entire process of collaboration are strategies that contribute to successful partnerships.

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