

## **PARTNERING FOR SUCCESS: MARRYING SOCIAL WORK WITH RELIGION AND CULTURE<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The educational landscape in South Africa is changing rapidly in response to, amongst other factors, economic market conditions in the country (De Bard & Peck, 2000:3). Universities are urged to ensure their own survival within a macro-plan for rationalisation (Ministry of Education, 2001).

At the University of Durban-Westville the discipline of Social Work is housed in the Faculty of Health Sciences. The authors formed a partnership with the Faculty of Humanities, more specifically with the School of Religion and Culture, a merger that may seem unlikely. According to Robinson and Daigle (2000:26), unfamiliar mergers can be as potentially successful as those which are more conventionally likely. It appears that it is not the participating disciplines/departments but the core ingredients of partnering that interplay to culminate in successful partnering.

Postgraduate Theology students have joined Social Work postgraduate students in the Family Therapy and Practice module. As a result of this union, other meaningful liaisons have been born. The discipline and faculty marriage has been consummated, producing a healthy hybrid of students. Tough developmental hurdles are expected, but this article attempts to encourage further academic debate to help equip us to meet the challenge of partnering for profit.

### **1. CONTEXT**

The University of Durban-Westville is regarded as a "Historically Black and Disadvantaged University". In this classification we have been described as accommodating demotivated students, as having large lecture halls in which we teach a faceless mass and as not encouraging teacher-student dialogue (Duckert, 2000). In addition to the financial constraints, there are technological retardation, enrolment deficits, demotivated staff, an exodus of academics and the need for a "transforming vision" (Morriss, 2000:55). Keller refers to educational institutions as needing to adapt to the "temper of the times" (2000:2), clearly identifying the need to adapt to a changing landscape in education globally. Planning for change in higher education must address low graduation rates, duplication of programmes and failure to implement institutional vision (De Bard & Peck, 2000:1). Such a complex context marks the need for creative effort and a spirit of survival.

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## 2. AN EXPOSÉ OF OUR PARTNERSHIPS

The programme mix in Religion and Culture and Social Work at the University of Durban-Westville “augments expertise” (Robinson & Daigle, 2000:29) and features several partnerships as follows:

- Teacher-student
- Student-student
- Teacher-teacher
- Discipline-discipline
- Partnerships with the community.

Teacher-student partnering emanates from social work educators teaching students of Theology. Students are selected for the module on the basis of their prior learning/experience. They are viewed as equal partners in the search for excellence in serving families. They value the status afforded them by educators, this being expressed through student appraisals. In the year 2001 the student-teacher partnership consisted of 11 members with a collective experience of 155 years of working with individuals and families. Families are informed of the experience that the team brings, increasing family confidence in therapy whilst also warming students to the value they bring into family therapy. Another value afforded the teacher-student liaison has been expressed as “needing help when objectivity is lost” (Module Evaluation, 2001). Thus, much as the educators prefer an equal partnership, students need and want to depend on the expertise of the educators as well. The partnership character thus fluctuates according to the needs of the student and the situation.

Student-student partnerships provide students with a sense of shared responsibility towards each other and towards the families they serve (Rezmierski, 2000:9). The team of students also mutually promotes cultural enrichment as they all come from varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds (De Bard & Peck 2000:1). The cultural mix provides the team with the armament needed to work with diverse families in various contexts (Kasiram, 1999:25). A valuable component of nurturing this partnership has been to encourage students to seek additional opinions, as no one individual can help a family comprehensively. Said one student: “No one person can fully explore all alternatives ...and this makes for enabling us to depend on one another” (Module Evaluation 2001). Co-therapy involving two trainees with the family has also provided for peer review and assistance that are deeply valued. The absence of competition which is replaced with co-dependency and valuing team input is refreshingly different and optimises the growth and development of team members.

Teacher-teacher partnering is widely acknowledged as being difficult as academics fight for supremacy. In this regard De Bard & Peck (2000:1) refer to the “standoffs that immobilize progress”. There could easily have been potential for similar academic haggling between the two educators responsible for the team. Instead good teaming is modelled by open and respectful communication, by valuing each other’s contribution overtly and covertly and by acknowledging that a team mind is immeasurably more valuable than a single mind. Working with families is emotionally draining and partnering thus enables the trainer and trainee alike to carry the emotional strain with dignity, whilst reserving energy for promoting team learning and family change.

Discipline-discipline partnering occurs between the Schools of Social Work and Theology. The core ingredients of this liaison again feature respect and honesty, whilst simultaneously embodying a common goal, viz. preparing students to become effective family therapists. The authors/trainers are respected and their worth openly acknowledged. Such affirmation and respect is not common amongst academics and it is possible that this emanates from the School of Religion and Culture teaching and practising these qualities as spiritual injunctions. Being

affirmed and openly valued has encouraged both disciplines to work within a strengths perspective rather than a problem-oriented one. It has allowed for growth and change and provided a springboard for generating new and relevant programmes.

Partnerships with the community have been forged through the practice education component of the module. This partnering has international support (Bourne *et al.*, 2000:15) and local appeal. Service learning through outreach efforts renders the programme mix socially responsive to community needs, embracing the University's mission statement and thus enjoying the University Management's support. Besides, the core business of the programme is about serving families, so it is impossible to avoid reaching out to the community. Serving families in the community has meant that partnerships extend to other service specialists. All these partnerships are carefully nurtured with the aim of ensuring excellence in serving families.

### 3. CRITICAL SUCCESS ISSUES IN PARTNERING

The following critical issues are identified as contributing to successful partnering:

#### (a) Institutional readiness and support

The University of Durban-Westville is presently in the throes of restructuring in keeping with guidelines contained in the National Plan for Higher Education (2001). Academic and administrative staff are locked in negotiations to re-shape the landscape of higher education at the University. The following characteristics mentioned in the national guidelines form the basis of our partnership efforts:

- A "focus on implementation" rather than engaging in time-consuming investigation and consultation. This is in keeping with Morriss (2000:63) indicating the need to translate "knowing into doing". Change through partnering is acknowledged as benefiting all role-players concerned and acted upon with trust;
- Graduates have been produced with skills and competencies to meet the human resource needs of the country. This has involved re-skilling and multi-skilling;
- Both schools have opened their programmes to produce a healthy mix/ crop of professionals who confidently embrace both social work and spirituality in helping families;
- Family therapy training has been identified as a niche area for which there is the requisite infrastructural support and expertise. Identifying a niche area is also discussed by Bourne *et al.* (2000:15) as critical to successful partnering;
- The new programme is not an "unnecessary duplication" in relation to programmes offered by other institutions;
- Knowledge outputs in the programme are recognised globally and graduates will be able to use their knowledge and skills in the international marketplace.

Robinson and Daigle (2000:18, 25) refer to the need for "encouragement" for the "relationship to take root and grow" as do Cross (2000:12) and Morriss (2000:61) when they mention the need for pressure from outside higher education and public support for change endeavours. Despite ongoing debate over restructuring and resource reallocations, the "job has been done" and progress has not been derailed.

The programme addresses "problems and needs of society" and "opens up opportunities for personal growth and empowerment" (University of Durban-Westville, 1991).

**(b) Having a learner-centred focus**

The partnership focuses on the learner.

*Learners as partners:* An equal partnership between student and educator forms the basis of our teamwork efforts. At the “heart of all good teaching is student learning” ([www.csd.uwa.edu.au/-HERDSA/conceptions.html](http://www.csd.uwa.edu.au/-HERDSA/conceptions.html)). Students need to be afforded respect for what they bring to the module and once this is acknowledged, it promotes quality in learning and teaching. Students acknowledge the partnership as having “fundamental importance” and refer to “learning and picking up techniques and skills from each other” as allowing for maximum growth, both personal and professional (Module Evaluation 2001). Honest reflection is encouraged and students are empowered to think therapeutically as well as spiritually.

*Learner as consumer:* Cross (2000:12) refers to the “greased track” movement of the learner as the primary focus. There is a disregard of age-old traditions that have been close to the hearts of many an academic. The concerns of being different for “difference’s sake”, of involving the public/community to dictate academic agendas and of bowing to sponsorship demands have been transcended. Consumer/student needs are afforded respect, which is expressed through multiple exits, depending on what the student can afford to study, opportunities for multi-skilling to ensure that the module meets the requirements of being market related, and evaluating learning outcomes periodically. The module thus has academic merit and is marketable nationally and internationally.

**(c) Demystifying theory**

The module’s success is attributed to the co-curricular component of clinical work in which the theory is transformed into reality. Co-curricular support is also mentioned by Bourne *et al.* (2000:16), who discuss it as a strategic goal for developing a learner-centred environment. Students have cited both components of the module as “invaluable in understanding families, even my own” (Module Evaluation 2001). They also mention that the clinical component provides objective support for the theory, rendering it more comprehensible.

In addition, technology is used to further demystify theory. Students are supervised through a one-way mirror and a telephone device. Interviews are videotaped to facilitate maximum learning. Bourne *et al.* (2000:15) also mention the use of innovative technology in promoting learner growth. In addition, there is one-on-one supervision of the student before each family therapy session, thereby affording the student further opportunity to identify and clarify the use of theory. This may be time consuming, but appears to be the responsible way to ensure learning within an outreach service.

**(d) Trust, respect, teamwork and humour**

Respect forms a core ingredient of the partnership as mentioned in the exposé of collaborations. Trust and good teamwork flow naturally from respect and underpin good professional relationships. Integrity is displayed at all times and fears and concerns are openly shared. These are no hidden agendas in discussions and negotiations (Morriss, 2000:63). De Bard and Peck (2000:6) refer to standoffs that cause academics to “defend a fortress”. Trust levels need to permit openness and valuing of differences. The contribution of each partner is honoured whilst diverse inputs are embraced (Rezmierski, 2000:10). The partnering has secured a strong postgraduate programme, a valuable service learning component and satisfied students.

In addition, students have fun while learning (Kasiram, 1998:309). Lewis (1994:124) refers to humour as being the fuel for the creative process and it is believed that our creativity has been

nurtured in a climate where we can laugh with each other and where we are freed to contribute without fear of reprisal or reproach.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

At present, there is uncertainty regarding the development of the new programme mix and the shape and form of tertiary education in the near future. However, certainty does exist regarding core components of success that need to feature in academic partnerships.

*"The road to success has many detours because it is always under construction".* Barbara Johnson

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