

# What We have Learned by Building a Collaborative Partnership, 3(6)

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## **Abstract**

This paper contributes to the literature on why collaborative partnerships between schools and universities thrive or fail. It describes what we have learned through a successful collaborative partnership among the Brant County Board of Education, Nipissing University, and the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation. The paper describes the constellation of factors that influenced the success of the partnership. We had a clear and compelling cause and a history of collaboration that pre-dated the partnership. Our relationship was based on shared values, purposes and collaborative skills that enabled us to resolve issues of power and voice. We were able to influence decision making in our organizations and they were able to cut through red tape to translate their commitment into effective action amidst a challenging provincial context.

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## Overview

In April, 1998, The Brant County Board of Education, Nipissing University, and the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation (OPSTF) launched a new professional development resource kit entitled, *Action Research: School Improvement Through Research-Based Professionalism* ([Delong & Wideman, 1998b](#)). The kit includes two books (Delong & Wideman, 1998a; McNiff, 1998) and a video program ([Delong & Wideman, 1998c](#)). We are proud of the partnership that produced this kit because we think it is symbolic of how collaboration by a school board, a university, and a teachers' federation can provide sustained support for research-based school improvement and professional growth.

A great deal has been written extolling the advantages of partnerships in education to address a wide range of issues from school improvement to teacher education. Far less has been written about why collaborative work involving schools and universities thrives or fails ([Johnston & Kirschner, 1996](#)). We agree with [Johnston and Kirschner](#) that general factors may be identified that influence success in partnerships. We also agree that there is no magic formula for success because each partnership is unique. It is through studying individual examples of partnership that general factors and their interrelationships may be identified.

Based on our experience, we think that a collaborative partnership is affected by a constellation of factors which, when combined, drive or impede the project ([Senge, 1990](#)). In this article, we discuss the constellation of factors that affected our partnership. While contextual factors are important to the success of partnerships and need to be studied further, the key factors in our experience are the trusting relationships among the project leaders (in this case, ourselves) and between the project leaders and their organizations. The former enabled us to build understanding and agreement and resolve issues important to the project. The latter affected our ability to influence our organizations to establish and support the partnership.

## Background on the Three Organizations

Our project involved collaboration by three organizations with varying responsibilities for the education of children and for the professional growth of teachers. These organizations were able to sustain support for the project while two of the three underwent substantial changes themselves. During the project, provincial legislation was enacted to require the Brant County Board of Education to amalgamate with two neighbouring boards to become the Grand Erie District School Board. At the same time OPSTF was preparing to join with the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario (FWTAO) to create the new Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO).

The Brant County Board of Education employed 1,500 teachers and provided elementary and secondary education for approximately 17,000 students in 50 schools. The board was particularly proud of its work in parental and community involvement and had partnered with a variety of local organizations and businesses to enhance programs and services for students. OPSTF

represented 13,000 statutory members, 30,000 occasional teachers, and 4,000 voluntary members. The organization had earned a well-deserved reputation for producing quality professional development activities and publications. Nipissing University, formerly a college of Laurentian University, received its charter in 1992. The Faculty of Education, which provides Bachelor of Education and Master of Education programs, has a continuous history dating back to 1909 and comprises about one third of the university's full-time enrollment each year.

## Evaluating the Project

We developed the following four criteria for judging the success of our project:

1. **Timeliness of Response:** We engaged our organizations in the partnership quickly and produced the kit in a very short time - 15 months from the beginning of negotiations to the release of the finished product.
2. **Informal Agreements:** The project was established and operated on a relatively informal basis. Despite major changes in our organizations and the change of one of the project's leaders, collaboration was maintained and issues were resolved without setbacks.
3. **Acceptance of Products in the Field:** While it is early to assess the impact of the kit, there have been indications that it is considered a valuable resource. For example, Jack Whitehead, internationally recognized authority on action research at the University of Bath, U.K., has judged it unique in the world in assisting teachers to engage in action research. He has highlighted it on his widely-read action research homepage (<http://www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw/>).
4. **New Collaborative Efforts:** Our organizations view the project as positive and valuable and are continuing under our leadership with a new venture - the development of a refereed electronic journal entitled the Ontario Action Researcher.

Because of work-related time pressures, we did not spend a great deal of time evaluating the partnership while we were producing the kit. The project was part-time and we were also performing our regular duties. We did keep journal notes but were most concerned with the action itself. Analysis of the project, therefore, has come about as a result of writing. Each time we have written articles, we have gone deeper into the analysis. We began by reflecting individually on our own journal notes; we talked by teleconference, audio-taped the conversations, and transcribed the tapes; we wrote and re-wrote face-to-face and at a distance over the Internet; and we revised drafts based on suggestions by critical friends. The responses of the reviewers and theme issue editors of IEJLL to original drafts pushed us to further develop our understandings.

Our advice is to plan for the process of evaluation right at the start of any project despite pressures to save time by not doing so. Having learned (or is it relearned?) our lesson, we now understand that we need to include in the project plan a set of steps for collecting and analyzing data. While the evaluation should be planned, however, the plan must be flexible, individualized and self-regenerating. A checklist of fixed and formulaic steps would not have served us well, because it would not have captured the complexity of the partnership process.

## Findings: Why Was Our Partnership Successful?

We have identified a constellation of six factors that worked together to influence the success of our partnership.

1. The project had a clear and compelling cause, action research.
2. A challenging provincial political context generated support for the project.
3. We had already developed a history of collaboration across federation, school system, and other organizational contexts.
4. Our relationship was based on shared values, purposes and collaborative skills.
5. We were able to influence decision making in our organizations.
6. Our organizations were able to translate commitment into effective action.

We will examine each of these factors in turn.

### A Compelling Cause, Action Research

Our experience was in sharp contrast to the pain and frustration described by [Noffke, Clark, Palmeri-Santiago, Sadler, and Shujaa \(1996\)](#) as they tried to develop understanding and agreement among themselves about the focus of their partnership. We had a clear-cut purpose that we all agreed to be of worth. The compelling nature of this "cause" was shared by a network of professionals within and beyond our organizations who contributed in a variety of ways.

Action research is an approach to school improvement that honours teachers' professionalism. Individually, and in groups, teachers identify questions about their practice, make appropriate changes, and collect data to discover the impact of those changes. They record their studies and share the results of their investigations with others ([Delong & Wideman, 1996](#); [McNiff, 1998](#); [McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996](#); [Whitehead, 1993](#)).

Traditionally, teachers have accepted the predominant role of universities in educational research and the development of educational knowledge. Top-down change ignores the experience and voice of the teacher and has been shown to be largely ineffective in creating substantial changes in classroom practices ([Fullan, 1982](#)). Action research is more consistent with [Schon's \(1983\)](#) model of Reflection in Action than with the model of Technical Rationality that supports top-down change ([Schon](#)). Technical Rationality sees professional practice as instrumental problem solving and encourages a hierarchical relationship between the experts who develop knowledge and the practitioners who implement knowledge. [Schon's](#) work called the model of technical rationality into question. He found that in areas of uncertainty (and there are many in education), effective practitioners shift from instrumental problem solving to reflective practice. They become researchers who identify a problem, develop a hypothesis, and conduct an experiment to see how it changes the problematic situation. By pursuing cycles of action research, reflective practitioners develop new practices that are grounded in the reality of their own contexts.

The emphasis in action research on writing and sharing ([Delong & Wideman, 1996](#); [McNiff, 1998](#); [Whitehead, 1993](#)), enables teachers to communicate the real changes in practice they have made and to contribute substantially to the development of the knowledge base of their own

profession. From a hierarchical perspective this is a bottom-up approach to change. From a collaborative perspective, however, it suggests a more collegial relationship among schools and universities to honour what each brings to the development of educational knowledge.

The process of action research itself is conducive to the formation of collaborative partnerships particularly in its use of "critical friends" ([Whitehead, 1993](#)) to support the research process. Our partnership was also strengthened by a focus on action research and its capacity to build links among groups ([Calhoun, 1994](#); [MacTaggart, 1992](#)). Action research mitigates against an attitude of individual ownership of a project to nurture, instead, a vision of learning and growing together. This shift from egocentricity to seeing oneself as part of a larger picture ([Senge, 1990](#)) can affect the ability of both individuals and organizations to contribute to the improvement of the social order ([McNiff, 1992](#)).

## **A Challenging Provincial Context**

[Cupertino \(1996\)](#) recognized the impact of context on the accomplishments of a partnership project. A challenging provincial context generated support for our project. Many people recognized that action research could address widespread concerns emanating from the Ontario government's massive restructuring of elementary and secondary education. Successive governments had worked to establish curriculum expectations for students and to increase teachers' and school boards' accountability for achieving them. The accountability initiatives of the current provincial government include a standardized provincial report card, standardized provincial testing, and, through the [Ontario College of Teachers](#) (1998), the establishment of standards of professional practice.

While the government is identifying expected results of student learning, it is not dictating the means by which those results must be achieved by teachers and schools. Because students learn at different rates and in different ways and because Ontario is a large province with a diverse population, the decision making of teachers is essential for enabling children in individual classrooms to achieve expected results. Teachers and education officials are beginning to see professionalism and practitioner research as keys to improving the quality of student learning and accountability ([Eames, 1995](#); [Laidlaw, 1996](#)). Action research is a vital means of implementing this results-based approach to education and addressing the increasing demands for accountability by parents and community ([Macbeth, McCreath, & Aitchison, 1995](#)).

The economic rationalist policies of the current conservative government and policy reversals by successive governments have created an atmosphere of cynicism among Ontario educators. Teachers have begun to see action research as a positive way to deal with their own cynicism by taking charge of changes in their individual classrooms and by seeing whether those changes improve students' learning. Teachers create and share their own living educational theories as they research their own educational practices ([Evans, 1995](#); [Noffke & Stevenson, 1995](#); [Whitehead, 1993](#)).

Within the context of rapid change in Ontario education, enthusiasm for action research influenced a wide variety of people, both within and beyond our organizations, to volunteer to contribute to the project. For example, we were able to generate over six hours of videotaped

interviews with elementary, secondary and university teachers to be used as the basis of the video program. A call for papers resulted in a rich array of research accounts and articles for the book. When we found that the kit needed clear and concise instructions on how to begin to conduct action research, Jackie approached Jean McNiff, an educational consultant from the U.K. Based on their pre-existing friendship and Jean's commitment to values and purposes we all shared, she generously donated her book, *Action Research for Professional Development: Concise Advice for New Action Researchers* ([McNiff, 1998](#)), for use in the kit.

## **A History of Collaboration**

[Kirschner, Dickinson, and Blosser \(1996\)](#) recognized the need to devote considerable effort and time in school/university partnerships to relationship building. As individuals we had already developed a history of collaboration with one another across federation, school system and other organizational contexts. Consequently, we did not have to begin to develop trust and synergy at the same time we were initiating the project. We had learned that each of us consistently followed through on our commitments and that none of us played to the grandstand.

The collaborative relationship around action research began in 1994 with Jackie Delong, Ron Wideman, and Linda Grant, then an executive assistant at OPSTF. After Linda left OPSTF in February 1997 to take up new responsibilities with Ontario's new College of Teachers, Marg Couture continued the partnership for OPSTF. Linda and Marg were on staff together at OPSTF. Jackie knew Linda and Marg through OPSTF activities. Ron and Jackie had co-authored a number of articles on action research and had both contributed to the development of [The Common Curriculum: Policies and Outcomes, Grades 1 to 9 \(1995\)](#), for the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. (This policy document was the result of a six-year curriculum development initiative begun by previous Liberal Party and New Democratic Party governments. [The Common Curriculum](#) was repudiated after the Conservative Party gained power in June 1995 and has recently been replaced with a hastily developed curriculum that includes many specific technical expectations.)

As project leaders, we developed a strong working relationship during the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training Common Curriculum Implementation Fund Project that laid the groundwork for our action research collaboration. In early 1995, OPSTF received a grant from the Fund to investigate the use of new action research to implement The Common Curriculum in Ontario schools. The project involved four boards of education. Teachers learned the skills of action research and conducted their own studies. By the time the Ministry funding ran out in December 1996, the project had produced the first "Act, Reflect, Revise" forum and a book ([Halsall & Hossack, 1996](#)) in which the teachers shared their research.

## **A Relationship Based on Shared Values, Purposes, and Collaborative Skills**

Our collaborative relationship was based on shared values, purposes, and collaborative skills that enabled us to think compatibly and solve problems in ways that satisfied our individual and organizational needs ([Christenson, Eldredge, Ibom, Johnston, & Thomas, 1996](#)). As we worked together, discovering our common experiences helped us clarify the values and purposes we shared. We are all teachers by profession, with significant classroom and school experience. We



have all been responsible for planning and leading professional development activities and have all made it a point to learn about and practice action research. We have a commitment to our own career-long professional growth. We have developed a capacity for risk taking and honouring multiple perspectives by serving in a variety of educational roles. These experiences helped us develop knowledge, skills and values that support collaboration.

As we worked together we found ourselves employing complementary interpersonal skills. For example, there were times during our partnership when Ron focused on how to complete the task at hand, Jackie connected the task at hand to other aspects of the project to create new possibilities, and Marg clarified and reinforced positively both kinds of contributions. Our shared values, purposes, and skills enabled us to know each others' priorities and the priorities of each of our organizations so that we could resolve issues readily. A key problem we faced was how to identify and address the different perspectives of teacher researchers and university researchers. Issues of power and knowledge ([Foucault, 1979](#)) related to these different perspectives kept surfacing (like the Loch Ness Monster, we joked) usually when one partner reacted to something said or written by someone else. As we talked the matter through, we agreed that the differing perspectives on research need not be in conflict. The development of collaborative relationships between teacher researchers and university researchers ([Kirschner, Dickinson, & Blosser, 1996](#)) can enhance the legitimate roles of both in the development of educational knowledge.

## **An Ability to Influence Decision Making**

[Block \(1987\)](#) and [Covey \(1989, 1990\)](#) have written extensively about the importance of developing circles of influence and of seeing influence as a two-way process. We were able to influence decision making within our organizations in ways that enabled them to commit to the partnership with a minimum of formality. We could do this because we had developed trusting relationships within our organizations and because we took the needs and aspirations of our organizations into account in planning and carrying out the project.

In 1996, when the Common Curriculum Implementation Fund project funded by the Ministry came to an end, no further ministry funding was available due to changes in government policies. Because teachers had responded positively to the project and because action research had the potential to improve student learning, we believed that providing sustained support for action research was necessary and desirable. Under the leadership of Jackie and Linda, the Brant County Board of Education and OPSTF agreed to cosponsor a second "Act, Reflect, Revise" forum in February 1997.

The current partnership was envisioned in December 1996 as we discussed the benefits of publishing the experience of the teachers who would be presenting at the upcoming forum. We became excited about the possibility of producing a professional development kit that would include print and video components. The video would put faces and voices to the names in the book and visually communicate teachers' enthusiasm. We decided to try to put together a partnership of our three organizations to provide resources for the project. Timelines were tight. There were only ten weeks until the forum. To make the project cost effective, it was essential to videotape interviews at the forum and to call for papers.

The positions we held gave us direct and immediate access to our chief executive officers. The Common Curriculum Implementation Fund Project had provided evidence of the power of action research to revitalize teachers and create positive changes in practice ([Halsall & Hossack, 1996](#)). We used this evidence to generate support. We shared the positive responses of teachers who had been using action research and communicated our conviction that action research had the potential to contribute powerfully to school improvement and teacher professionalism.

Within a month, we had obtained approvals to proceed. The partnership was truly a collaborative venture. It was initiated by all the partners together and was based on equity of purposes, contributions, and decision making. Funding limitations would have made it difficult for any of the partners to accomplish a project of this scale by themselves. There was a realization that the partnership would increase the breadth of support for the resulting kit and, therefore, the likelihood of widespread use.

### **An Ability to Translate Organizational Commitment into Effective Action**

[Senge \(1990\)](#) and [Bennis and Biederman \(1997\)](#) have described the power that is accessed when organizations are able to focus their energies on clearly envisioned tasks. We were fortunate that our organizations were able to translate their commitment to the project into effective action. Following the February 1997 forum, there was a whirlwind of action to complete the project as soon as possible. We finished the video program by September 1997 and the book manuscript the next month. Editing, design, and layout began with the intention of releasing the kit at the December 1997 Conference of the Ontario Educational Research Council. However, political action by Ontario teachers in response to education policy changes by the provincial government delayed completion until March 1998.

We continued to enjoy the trust and strong support of our chief executive officers throughout the project. As a result, most of the arrangements among the organizations were made verbally and on the basis of trust. Bureaucratic procedures were minimized. Only two brief letters outlining general expectations for the goals of the project were required.

Our organizations accepted an emerging design that enabled us to complete the project while continuing our regular duties as staff. For example, Ron was assigned a practice teaching supervision route near Toronto that allowed him to attend project meetings in Brantford and Mississauga. Differentiated responsibilities that emerged through mutual decision making were based on our own individual capabilities, the voluntary involvement of our organizational colleagues, and the available resources of our organizations.

The amount of development money provided by each partner was balanced by in-kind contributions. Jackie and Ron co-ordinated development of the book and video. Marg coordinated layout, design, packaging, and production. Staff in all three organizations contributed invaluable organizational and technical work. A Brant County firm donated the digitization of the video program. Technical and support staff at Nipissing University arranged teleconferences and supplied transcription services.



## Conclusions

Based on our experience, we confirm the view that general factors can be identified which affect the success or failure of collaborative partnerships. We have come to think about such factors using the metaphor of "constellations" because it enables us to focus on how factors cluster and interrelate in individual cases to drive or impede particular projects ([Senge, 1990](#)). When a preponderance of factors interact to support the partnership, it will be more likely to thrive.

When phrased as questions, the constellation of factors we have identified may provide a framework for building and evaluating other partnerships. The questions we suggest follow:

1. To what extent is there a compelling cause to which project leaders and organizations can commit?
2. To what extent does the provincial/state/national context support the importance of the partnership for individuals and organizations?
3. To what extent has a positive or negative history of trust and collaboration been developed among the project leaders and between the project leaders and key administrators in their respective organizations prior to the establishment of the partnership?
4. To what extent do the project leaders share values, experience, and collaborative skills that can be used as a basis for developing understanding and agreement and resolving issues related to the project?
5. To what extent are the project leaders able to influence decision making within their organizations in ways that enable the organizations to support the project?
6. To what extent are the organizations able to translate their commitment to the project into effective action?

For us, a key factor is the trust relationship among the project leaders that enables them to identify and resolve issues that are critical to the success of the partnership. Our experience confirms the view that issues of power and voice are far more likely to be resolved positively within the context of strong collaborative relationships and that such relationships are also important in bridging the substantial cultural differences that exist between schools and universities.

While we confirm that building relationships must be the first priority in developing collaborative partnerships, we think that partnerships have an advantage when the project leaders have a history of collaboration that predates the project. The test for the partnership may lie in the time individuals will commit to building and maintaining trusting, synergistic relationships.

There is a need for further study of the importance of contextual factors in the success of partnerships. We think that there are at least two interrelated factors that need to be considered - the context external to the partnering organizations and the context internal to each of the partnering organizations. A supportive external context provides potential motivation for action by the partnering organizations. A supportive context within the organizations removes barriers to action, makes resources available, and nurtures the collaborative process.

Taking into account the contextual factors, partnership and powerful purpose are inextricably linked. Identification of a common cause, galvanized by contextual need and individual and organizational values, is a powerful motivator for productive action. When the common cause is elusive, however, there may be difficulty in generating the enthusiasm and support necessary to drive a partnership.

We believe that relationship is the key factor in bridging context and cause. Organizations should encourage staff to develop a wide range of collaborative relationships with staff in their own and related organizations and to use these contacts when partnership opportunities arise. The trusting relationships between the project leaders and key decision makers in the partnering organizations enables the organizations to provide effective support for a partnership. Interorganizational partnerships happen most effectively when the chief executive officers are in direct communication with the project leaders in the partnership and share commitment for the project.

Johnston and Kirschner (1996) indicated that collaborative partnerships require skills that many individuals do not possess. We agree that participants need knowledge, skills, and values that honour multiple perspectives and nurture trust, mutuality, and equity. We want to explore this more fully. There is a quality to collaborative partnerships that cannot be expressed in checklists and contracts. When you approach partnerships as you approach contract negotiation, the language shifts, the process changes, and the flexibility is lost.

## Next Steps

Currently the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, the Grand Erie District School Board, and Nipissing University are embarking on a new cycle of partnership to develop an electronic, refereed journal entitled

[The Ontario Action Researcher](http://www.unipissing.ca/oar/oarHOMEPAGE/webhomepg.htm)

(<http://www.unipissing.ca/oar/oarHOMEPAGE/webhomepg.htm>).

The purpose of the [journal](#), the first issue of which is expected early in 1999, will be to provide sustained support for teachers as they develop educational knowledge through action research. As leaders of the new project, we want to continue to develop our understanding of partnership as we improve our practice working together collaboratively.

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### Areas of Current Interest or Research:

- Ontario College of Teachers,
- Action Research,
- Professional Development,
- Partnerships in Education

### Area of Current Interest or Research:

- Action Research: the nature of educative influence as a system leader
- Educational Change
- Partnerships in Education

### Area of Current Interest or Research:

- Action Research in the B.Ed. Program
- How Teachers Change Their Classroom Practices
- Partnerships in Education
- Technology in Education