

The Holy Grail of Developing Partnerships for DL in Military Education

The Keys to Success

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Abstract

The use of distributed learning (DL) environments is growing at an exponential rate. Support for these environments takes on many different forms, but all the players in this arena (military, civilian, and contractor) need to develop relationships and partnerships to foster institutional success and promote learning outcomes for military learners. In this article, we examine characteristics that promote partnerships for distributed learning. We describe key elements of effective partnerships, including understanding roles, creating trust, dealing with change, leadership roles, and building cross functional partnerships. This article provides evidence-based best practices and strategies for navigating the complex web of military partnerships, professional relationships, organizational structures, group dynamics, and shared goals as well as addressing identified barriers to make true partnerships possible. DL partnerships require cultivation, but the time and effort invested in fostering these key elements will promote institutional success.

In today's world, distributed learning (DL) has gone from "nice to have" to a requirement. To effectively navigate DL technologies that promote student learning, educators, support staff, and leadership must come together in partnership to achieve a shared mission and vision. Who works together, and how and when they work, are critical aspects of successful DL partnerships in education.

A partnership, as defined by the World Health Organization's African Partnerships for Patient Safety (2009), is "a collaborative relationship between two or more

Figure 1

Example Cast of Players and Their Roles in DL Partnerships



parties based on trust, equality and mutual understanding for the achievement of a specified goal ... that involve risks as well as benefits, making shared accountability critical” (p. 2). This article highlights the unique affordances gained when true partnerships are formed. Both teams and partnerships have groups of people working together on a task, but not all people working together are a team, and not all teams form true partnerships. In a team, each member normally only speaks to their area of expertise, whereas in a partnership there is a collective voice, and everyone can



provide input on aspects outside of their areas of expertise. While teams and partnerships share many characteristics, the critical difference between them is how the relationship is fostered. Considerations for fostering such relationships will be the focus of this article.

Background—The Players in DL Partnerships

A partnership involves a cast of players that includes a wide variety of people representing different stakeholders or groups and incorporates diverse viewpoints. Finding stakeholders beyond the typical silos and including them is critical for the success of DL (Katz et al., 2002). In the military environment, partnerships are likely to include military, civilians, and contractors.

The way the cast of players interacts impacts the partnership. Not all members must be included in all partnerships focused on DL, but the leaders of the initiative should analyze and discuss who should be involved before any DL partnership is formed to

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be sure that there is appropriate representation from across the organization to successfully meet the mission. Leadership for the partnership can come from any of the functional areas, as described in Figure 1, or a partnership can have a dedicated project manager/leader whose role is to oversee the project. Many times, the leaders of the project work across departments and have the best insight into the landscape outside of the partnership, which is essential for organizational communication and to keep silos and duplication of efforts to a minimum.

It is important to note that contractors and subcontractors may be part of any of these partnerships. The leader needs to clearly identify how the contract supports the goals/mission of the project, establish a relationship and a communication plan with the contractors' project/program leader, and have a clear understanding of the chain of command within the organization. The leader may not allow contractors to supervise government personnel, activities, or perform inherently governmental functions (Acquisition.gov, 2022).

Distributed learning projects benefit from bringing together stakeholders with many different roles and responsibilities (Xu & Morris, 2007) within the military environment. The cast of players—military, civilians, learners, and contractors—provides the diverse viewpoints needed for successful DL project partnership.

Partnership Types

Different types of partnerships can be formed to advance DL projects in government, military, industry, and academia. Aligning the partnership type with its mission and goals is important. Below are different types of partnerships that can advance DL projects.

Dynamic or Task Force Partnership

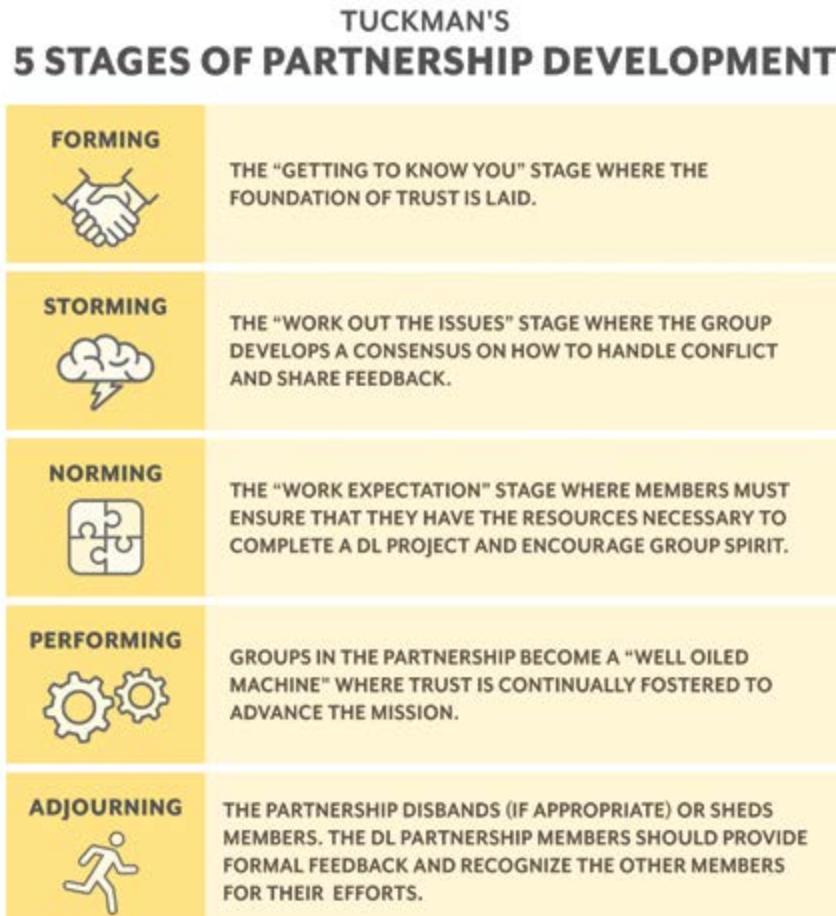
These partnerships are made up of stakeholders from various departments or functional areas who come together to quickly address an immediate organization-wide task/problem. It could bring together almost any member from within the organization. There is normally one leader. The partnership is dissolved once the task/problem has been completed or solved. An example from DL using dynamic or task force partnership is bringing together a group of instructional designers, graphic designers, faculty, learners, and IT staff to develop standardized templates to be used within the learning management system for the organization.

Functional Partnerships

These partnerships occur when members of the same department or functional area are brought together intentionally to focus on a task/problem that affects



Figure 2
Tuckman's 5 Stages of Partnership Development



that organization on an ongoing basis. There is a single leader who is responsible for the entire group and its outcomes. This type of partnership does not dissolve once the immediate need is met; the members move on to address other related needs together. A curriculum review committee that reviews DL courses is an example of this type of committee. It could include trainers or faculty as well as representatives from departments. Once a single course review is completed, the partnerships do not disband. They continue to work in their functional groups as a committee to review more courses over time.



Interworking Partnerships

These partnerships are made up of members from different areas of activity, and members are usually at the same level of the organization's hierarchy. They form to provide a multidisciplinary view of a task/problem. There is normally one leader. This type of partnership dissolves once the project is completed or the problem is solved. An example of this type of partnership would be bringing together a group of department heads to look at a new mission and vision for DL and refine the strategic plan to reflect those changes.

Developing Partnerships

Developing partnerships takes time and commitment. Bruce Tuckman's (1965) five-stage model of the group development process provides a lens for examining the evolution of group dynamics as effective DL partnerships develop in the unique context of the military and government environment. Tuckman's (1965) five typical stages include the following (see Figure 2):

- **Forming.** This is typically the “getting to know you” stage. Because true partnerships rely heavily on relationships for success, this phase is critical. During this stage, the group develops an understanding of the project goals and mission, expectations are set, plans for communication are developed, and a foundation of trust is laid.
- **Storming.** This is typically the “work out the issues” stage. Managing conflict and developing a shared sense of ownership and partnership for the task with group members are essential. The group starts to work on ideas and brings forward stylistic and personal differences. During this stage, roles are clarified, responsibilities are identified, and processes are documented. The group develops consensus on how to handle conflict and shares feedback.
- **Norming.** This is typically the “work expectation” stage. Group interaction and shared decision-making continue to support partnership building. The partnership members must ensure that they have the resources necessary to complete a project and encourage group spirit.
- **Performing.** This is typically the stage when the groups involved in the partnership become a “well-oiled machine.” The partnership members must be sure to check in and ensure they are fulfilling each other's partnership needs and providing positive reinforcement and support to one another. When feedback is provided (both positive and negative), the group must do so in ways that foster trust and capture learning points that advance the mission.
- **Adjourning.** At this point the partnership plans to disband (if appropriate) or shed a substantial number of members. It can be seen as the “light at the



end of the tunnel” stage. This often occurs when the project closes out. The partnership members develop options for disbanding. They may also create after action reports to reflect on lessons learned. At this stage the partnership members should provide formal feedback and recognize the other partnership members for their efforts.

A key to success is the intentional recognition and cultivation of the five stages to ensure smooth transitions. These stages implemented within a military context are affected by the military members’ time in office, rank, leadership style, prior experiences, and communication. Through application of the five stages in the unique military context, true partnerships are more likely to form that advance the mission of the organization.

Partnership Considerations

While the cast of players and partnership types are diverse and unique to each DL project, strong partnerships rely on communication, affirmation of the value of members, trust, conflict resolution, clarity of roles and responsibilities, shared decision-making, developing self-awareness as a leader, and organizational context and culture. These key considerations allow teams to move through the stages to form true partnerships.

Communication

Wagner et al. (2014) found that intentionally bringing together people who think in distinctly different ways can support partnership development. “Clear and open communication is a key factor in bridging those unique perspectives” (Wagner et al., 2014, p. 668) to strengthen the partnership. Communication includes sending and receiving information both verbally and nonverbally. It is important to make sure that the message sent is the message received, and that group members listen to each other—listening to understand, *not* to respond. Group members should use clear, closed-loop, continuous communication (Varpio et al., 2018). Continual and rigorous communication should encompass multiple methods and harness technology tools, including face-to-face and virtual meetings and weekly status updates (Roytek, 2010). The underlying goal of communication is to foster social interactions that engage members to build the relationship and the group’s collective voice—sharing information, clarifying project needs, reflecting on progress, discussing issues and solutions, and offering innovative ideas (Gardner et al., 2017; Wagner et al., 2014). Richardson et al. (2019) highlight the need for all parties to leave room for disagreements, to ensure creativity in finding the best solutions to support learning.



Cultivating a Culture of Trust

The cultivation of a culture of trust is one of the pillars for groups to engage productively and partnerships to form. Building trust takes time. Partnership members must be able to rely on and trust each other to be effective and gain mutual respect, accountability, and cohesion (Fiscella & McDaniel, 2018; Lencioni, 2002; Varpio et al., 2018).

These traits are tightly connected; spending a lot of time together does not ensure that partnership groups will be cohesive. Without cultivating a culture of trust, educational groups may work on the mission/project, but they never realize the full potential (Richardson et al., 2019). The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (Hall & Hord, 2015) is one method with which trust and support is built within partnerships. By considering how unique individuals may respond to a DL project, actively listening to concerns, and employing support, the leader can build the working relationships in a way that will improve outcomes and increase buy-in. Formal face-to-face meetings (whether physically together or virtually) create an opportunity for an exchange of information that may help in improving member trust and rapport. Accounting for potential barriers such as time zones and sites limiting use of certain technology tools can help new members gain trust in the leadership's understanding of individual circumstances (Bawa & Watson, 2017; Flavián et al., 2022)

Conflict Resolution

Conflicts occur when there are differences of opinions, interests, and/or actions intrapersonally and interpersonally. Conflict can be positive or negative, depending on how it is framed, interpreted, and addressed within a partnership. When conflict is not addressed, left unresolved, or handled unjustly, it can be detrimental to mutual trust and respect built within the partnerships (Nielsen et al., 2012). Working to resolve any conflict can further the partnership's goals and missions. It can also reduce conflicting messaging, duplication of efforts, competing interests, and poor implementation of DL products.

Roles and Responsibilities

A common predictor of an inefficient group is confusion about individual roles and functions (Razak, 2013). Having intentional conversations about each member's role, responsibilities, and chain of command enhances self-regulation and helps ensure projects are effectively completed. Partnership effectiveness also relies on ensuring that each member of the group is valued, all members perceive they are valued, and all roles are understood to be valuable and important (Bell et al., 2018; Varpio et al., 2018) whether the member is military, civilian, or contractor. Additionally, when partnership members



have the “required complement of knowledge and skills, ... [they] can effectively integrate their efforts to achieve the [partnership’s] purpose” (Bell et al., 2018, p. 351).

Shared Decision-Making

All members of a partnership must commit to decisions with a focus on the collective results and a commitment to shared decision-making. Partnerships have been shown to increase creative outputs when shared decision-making techniques are implemented (Hoch, 2013). Despite the variability in shared decision-making designs and practices, there are important considerations when implementing shared decision-making that supports contribution and promotion of ideas of all members (Hoch, 2013). Listening to others can help partnership members reframe issues when decisions need to be made. A partnership where members listen to others, value different perspectives, ideas, and experiences, and promote discussing them openly can foster an environment that can encourage creativity when making critical decisions such as what DL will look like at the organization, rules behind DL use, and DL policies.

Leadership for Partnerships

Effective leadership for a partnership supports relationship building, transforming mindsets, and completing successful missions/projects. The military’s unique educational environment is strengthened by a leader that promotes a shared mission and an intentional design of integrated groups to foster the development of partnerships. This article follows Northouse’s (2010) definition of leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3).

Groups of people can work together, but it is the intentional building of relationships that allows for true partnerships to form. Without leadership support and oversight, partnerships may work on the same DL mission, but they would not reach their full capacity through incorporating trust, time, conflict resolution, and communication.

Taking the time to reflect on one’s leadership style and how it influences a group of individuals to achieve a mission/project should be ongoing. Also, thinking about how one is taking care of the group (Noddings, 1984) can help the leader foster relationships. It is with this reflection that the leader can build the power of the group and the value that a true partnership brings to any DL project while supporting the organizational contexts and culture.

Conclusion

The support of DL environments takes on many different forms, but all the players (military, civilian, and contractor) in this arena need to develop partnerships to



foster institutional success and effectively promote learning outcomes. The keys to success for building groups into effective DL partnerships include fostering communication, cultivating trust, dealing with conflict, defining roles and responsibilities, and sharing decision-making, with all these elements supported and shaped by a reflective leader. A strong partnership developed within the unique organizational context and culture of the military environment takes time and effort but can generate valuable resources and long-term relationships to promote institutional success. Such a partnership can pull together personnel from all over the organization to speak with a strong, united collective voice and guide organizations to new heights in their DL programs and initiatives. 

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DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS

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