WPUPC as a Resource and Opportunity for Psi Chi and Psychology Club Methods Sharing: A Proposal[1]

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For more than 35 years, students and faculty from across Western Pennsylvania and outlying areas have gathered to present research and share ideas related to the field of psychology. Over this time, the number of participating schools as well as the number of attendees has grown. It therefore seems wasteful not to take additional advantage of the collective knowledge of these varied resources. Specifically, it is proposed that student representatives of the chapters of Psi Chi as well as the assorted psychology clubs make a special effort to gather at each WPUPC and share knowledge regarding fund raising, campus events and activities, dealing with student apathy, recruitment issues, etc. To illustrate this potential, we share two recent Psi Chi endeavors at RMU with some assessment data.

Introduction

The Western Pennsylvania Undergraduate Psychology conference (WPUPC) provides a unique opportunity for undergraduate psychology students to not only to present their own research, but also to see firsthand what their peers are researching. WPUPC has been growing its roots ever since the inaugural conference was put together under the sponsorship of the Northwestern Pennsylvania Psychological Association (NWPPA) in 1973. Those roots have spread to thousands of students; many of whom have since become well respected psychologists and key contributors in their field (WPUPC, 2011).

The American Psychological Association (APA) is the largest professional organization representing the field of psychology. Comprising over 154,000 members representing nearly every field psychology has to offer; from researchers and educators, to consultants and students. "Our mission is to advance the creation, communication and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people's lives" (APA, 2012). Not only is the APA composed of such distinguished members, the foundation upon which it abides is to "advance psychology as a science, a profession and as a means of promoting health, education and human welfare" (APA, 2012). It has become the unequivocal standard of information and knowledge-based material to be shared and forever advanced upon.

Psi Chi, the international honor society in psychology, was founded in 1929 with the intent to encourage, stimulate, and maintain excellence in the advancement of psychology (Psi Chi, 2012). Psi Chi is a member of the Association of College Honor Societies and an affiliate of the APA as well as the American Psychological Society (APS). Its presence has become established in over 1,000 colleges worldwide. Psi Chi serves two major goals. The first goal is to "provide academic recognition to its inductees by the mere fact of membership," which is practiced both on a local and national level. The second, and most relevant goal for this paper is, "an obligation of each of the Society's local chapters to nurture the spark of that accomplishment by offering a climate congenial to members' creative development" (Psi Chi, 2012).

At Robert Morris University, active members in Psi Chi as well as the RMU Psychology Club, have defined internal objectives that include: Gathering all those interested in the field of psychology to share, stimulate, and explore issues pertaining to real world situations, generating interest in current psychological issues, and while navigating throughout the educational path, furthering a deeper appreciation for the complexity and importance of psychology. Presumably, psychology clubs at other schools share similar expectations.

Given the ideals and goals outlined above that most of the WPUPC attendees no doubt share, it is

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my goal to take the first step in establishing a more formal implementation of those goals and ideals. Because the WPUPC has become a reliable opportunity for sharing ideas in psychology, to squander this chance for an organized collaboration across schools seems almost criminal. However, if it is determined that the WPUPC is ultimately not the best suited venue, my goal would be to use this opportunity to establish some other more formal network for psychology clubs and Psi Chi chapters to collaborate and share ideas; whether this be in terms of an actual physical location, a virtual (Internet) location, or both.

Communication (sharing ideas) among the various groups at various schools would likely be mutually beneficial; all the while serving the previously mentioned goals and ideals outlined by the WPUPC, the APA, and Psi Chi. In an effort to serve as a possible illustration of the benefits that knowledge-sharing possess, I will outline two recent endeavors of the RMU chapter of Psi Chi along with reflections and data concerning the success (and problem solving strategies) associated with both.

RMU Psi Chi Endeavor 1: The CM Experiments

Background: The original Conversation Menu (CM) idea was created by Theodore Zeldin (a philosopher/sociologist who became interested in the tendencies modern society has towards traditional social interaction). He said that people no longer have "true" conversations anymore. This is due to a rise in technology, a growing dependence on social media, and a gradual shift in what constitutes "interaction". He claimed that there is something lost in translation, so he gave people an opportunity to have a deep and thought-provoking conversation; as simple as that. He claimed that after participating in this conversation experience, people will find out more about total strangers than they already know about most of their friends (Grand Illusions, 2012).

Set Up: The events were cryptically advertised using the format of CM00-F11, CM01-F11, CM02-S12, etc. in part to avoid alienating introverts, but also to keep the activity a surprise to participants. The events were limited to between 12-20 participants mainly to ensure that there

would be sufficient personal space between groups given the size of the rooms we were working in. Once the group arrived, we paired people together who were complete strangers. We then told the group about where the idea of the "Conversation Menu" came from, what the evening agenda was, and a few tips on how to get the most out of the experience.

We told them not to rush through the experience just for the sake of "finishing" the task; we requested that they act as mature adults; and most importantly, we told them to try to enjoy the experience because they were going to find out things about themselves they never knew. We also invited the participants to freely and fully enjoy the refreshments we provided.

The event then began with the distribution of the first "appetizer menu" (two different menus were constructed for each course so that a unique menu was given to each member of each pair). In the menus we listed a set of lightly probing open-ended questions. The goal being to provide the conversation partners with a chance to warm up to each other and get used to the process. The first course lasted about 15-20 minutes. After which time we gave participants a short break while we collected the used menus and distributed the next set of menus.

The "main course" menus contained question designed to require more thoughtful, as well as perhaps more personal responses. This was where the real conversations were expected to develop beyond the more superficial "hey, how are you?" types of interactions strangers typically engage in. This segment constituted the bulk of the event for which we allowed about 50-60 minutes.

Once again, after a short break and following the collection of old menus, we served the "Dessert" menus. The questions here were designed to be a little more off-the-wall, humorous, and easy-going. We wanted participants to be able to shift from deep and personal to light and funny. The goal was to have them forget that they started the evening talking with a stranger, and feel instead that they were talking with somebody who was an old friend.

Before participants were released for the evening, we asked that they not reveal too much of

our event to others so that they can also experience it without any preconceived notions. Also, we asked everyone to complete an exit survey about their personal feelings and thoughts about the event. Table 1 contains a summary of the results of our exit survey.

Table 1. Means (and standard deviations) of responses to questions obtained from the exit survey of CM00-F11. Responses (n=15) were based on a 7-point Likert scale (1= terrible/never, 7=awesome/definitely).

1. Rate your overall experience?	6.92 (0.29)
2. How much do you feel that you learned about your conversation partner?	6.42 (1.23)
3. How much do you feel that you shared with your conversation partner?	6.17 (0.83)
4. How well did you stick to the questions?	5.00 (0.67)
5. How likely would you be to recommend this to a friend?	6.55 (0.78)

Things to think about: One of the biggest challenges was coming up with questions for the menus that were sufficiently engaging. We tried to avoid phrasing items that could be answered with simple one sentence responses. The next challenge was agreeing on whether questions best represented appetizer, main course, or dessert items. Another challenge came from finding a space that would suit our needs. Large enough to afford some privacy without seeming too crowded but that could accommodate our numbers. We found a good way to drown out neighboring conversations was to play soft music.

We found the best way to recruit people was to get permission from instructors to invite classrooms of people at a time no more than a day or two before the event. Although we tried to "sell" the event, our commitment to being vague probably hurt attendance for many (giving up a 2-3 hour chunk of time is not attractive to most students). However, we believe that by not detailing exactly what was to happen, intrigue and curiosity played a factor not only in recruiting adventurous students, but also in enhancing the actual experience. Admittedly, it also helped a lot that we advertised that we would serve refreshments. Our best responses to snack foods,

was a combination of sweet and savory, but especially fresh apple slices and individual bottles of juice, water, and soda.

After doing three different CM events, we found that the best participants were upper level students. Of the two events in which we had juniors or seniors, the experience was visibly more lively and energetic, and the participants rated it as a more enjoyable time. When we used mostly freshmen for our second CM, the mood was not as lively and although some pairs reported a good experience, the overall vibe seemed less open to the experience. To share personal information, there needs to be a trust level and maturity established. We found that upper level students understood and appreciated this more, and in turn had better conversations.

RMU Psi Chi Endeavor 2: Semester Newsletter

We really wanted to start a Psi Chi sponsored school newsletter geared towards psychology students. I collaborated for a few weeks with our faculty advisor before putting together the first edition The Psychology Couch (fall edition). The front page featured a welcome from myself (Psi Chi President) giving a little of my background, info on Psi Chi (what it is, what are its goals, how to get nominated, etc.), and why I wanted so badly for people to appreciate and learn about psychology! We incorporated in the margins things like "Important Dates", "Table of Contents" and the Psi Chi logo. The body and back page consisted of a not-too-serious interview with a faculty member and a "research round-up" section talking about the previous WPUPC. The margins were also decorated with quotes from psychologists, and a list of recent Psi Chi inductees. Another faculty member also contributed a full-page article related to his research interests. The back page included a report from the RMU Psychology Club as well as some more general "fun" items (scavenger hunt, Psychology themed cross-word puzzle). Most of these themes will be regular parts of future newsletters but we hope to tailor the contents to best serve the majors.

Things to think about: As with any big project, some problems arose while drafting the newsletter. For one, fitting everything into four pages takes a

lot of careful attention to detail and even more editing. Second, deciding the layout always presents a challenge because our goal was to bring awareness to Psi Chi and the psychology department as a whole, so formatting the layout efficiently was key!

Another thing that unexpectedly arose as a problem for us was the cost of printing. In order to make the newsletter attractive, we used color printing. To limit the possibility of lost pages, we restricted the contents to four 8.5 x 11 sheets which were arranged and printed on a single, 11 x 17 sheet of paper which was then folded. Each copy cost more than $2.00. To mitigate these costs, we needed to do a quick fundraiser. We drafted a professional letter detailing our needs and printed it on letterhead. We then used copies of the letter as "receipt requests" which we hand-delivered to a variety of local restaurants with a request for gift card donations. From these generous contributions ($262), we were able to put together a gift-card basket which we raffled off on campus. In order to make tickets more attractive, we divided all contributions into a 1st place basket ($152 value), a 2nd place basket ($69 value), and a 3rdplace basket ($65 value). We sold tickets for $1 apiece and used the resulting money to help defer the cost of publishing the newsletters.

Reflections & Discussion

The goals of organizations such as Psi Chi and APA are to perpetuate the science of psychology by recognizing and awarding students who represent academic success, character, and a genuine passion for learning. WPUPC provides a unique opportunity for these students to share their ideas and further stimulate intellectual curiosity.

There is great potential to promote the ideals and goals of such organizations at the WPUPC by incorporating a specific time for representatives of Psi Chi as well as the Psychology Clubs from each school to meet and share their ideas with one another. This could be done by extending the morning by 30-45 minutes before the poster sessions begin which would allow some time for the group to convene. Alternatively, there could be a special lunch session arranged similar to that of the WPUPC Steering Committee.

Not only can this "exchange of Psi Chi members" be utilized at the yearly WPUPC, it would also be beneficial to add a link to the official WPUPC website to serve as an access point to an online database of ideas. The clubs/organizations of different schools could access this resource directly from the WPUPC website. Here, representatives could make and discuss upcoming plans, generate ideas, and speak both before and after the conference to keep a line of communication open throughout the year. It would be a great way to keep Psi Chi and Psychology Club members connected.

There are a number of activities that Psi Chi and the RMU Psychology Club have participated in that promote unity and bonding amongst its members such as "Hope Grow," book drives, fundraising events, volunteer opportunities, induction ceremonies, etc. To continue to advance these types of clubs, collaboration amongst surrounding schools will prove to be mutually beneficial and can provide greater exposure to the field on a local and national level.

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