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“I Don’t Collaborate With Anyone”: A Tension Of Ideas & Perspective

What follows is an interview with Professors David Bernstein and Richard Joannis conducted by the editor on 21 January 1998. Bernstein and Joannis have co-taught in the Honors Program and in the General Education Program. Bernstein, a professor in Psychology, came to GVSU in 1973 as a charter faculty member in College IV. Joannis, an associate professor in Sociology, came to GVSU in 1971.



Interviewer: Let’s start with how the idea of teaching together came about.

DB: We’d been discussing the idea for about a year. Actually we had a failed attempt because the Honors Program had been after psychology for years when Carl Insalaco was chair, to do something in the Honors Program, and Carl kept saying we have too much to do for our majors and other service courses. Eventually Richard and I kept talking. Finally, one of us must have said “Let’s make a proposal.” And then we made a joint proposal with some seed money from Nancy Harper.

Interviewer: The students had to agree to take both Richard’s sociology class and your [David’s] psychology class?

RJ: Yes. These were just what we would call regular students who were trying, who had been admitted to Grand Valley, nothing was distinguishable about them at all.

Interviewer: They hadn’t chosen a major?

RJ: No, they didn’t know what they were getting into, whereas

the honor students did have a more clear picture of what was expected of them.

DB: I think Johnnie Callahan had talked to the honor students about it. But neither group knew what they were getting into because the whole idea was to develop—

Interviewer: A parallel?

DB: No, a tension. How would you describe it? [turns to RJ]

RJ: I had taught Love, Sex, and Gender for the honors program. It was a year course. That ran into scheduling problems, so it was dropped. They had asked me to come up with something because I'd taught for them before. I had gone to the Psychology Department but everyone with whom I would bring something up would say, "you're leaving something out of it. No psychologist could teach that." Or: "We don't teach that way." Finally the only two people that I could go to would be David [Bernstein] and Chris O'Connor. David and I would have our conversations and were comfortable with each other. I had known David before. Then we went back and forth about subject matter, and it wasn't just political talk, there was some real psychological talk. We talked about disciplinary fields and scholars in them.

DB: In fact I was really scared because I knew Richard used psychology as a foil. It was like putting myself in the den, the lion's den.

Interviewer: An interesting spot to be in, in some ways.

DB: Sure, fear and interest often go together. . . .

Interviewer: So how did this discussion evolve?

RJ: I think that we were just throwing subjects out and I was getting really frustrated. I figured that there was no common ground. Every time I pushed a topic for inquiry he would say "too much work." Or, "I don't know enough about that." Or: "You're just trying to take over the territory." I don't know which one of us decided that we could do something on anorexia, or the body. I had done work on the body, because one of my major interests in my Love, Sex and Gender course was to view the historical transformation of bodies. I had a familiarity with that.

DB: But I said let's do something I know more about, let's do memory. Let's do repressed memory. That's a controversial and very hot topic.

Interviewer: But does sociology deal with that?

DB: Well, it's a social phenomenon.

RJ: It's a social and cultural phenomenon.

DB: It was an enormous amount of work. We were doing something equivalent to Psychology 101 and Sociology 201 except we weren't. We were reconstituting the whole course, because the idea was to develop something about the disciplinary perspectives in the first six or seven weeks. You see, we didn't co-teach the course. The classes really didn't meet together. They took his class at ten and mine at eleven. The only time they saw us together was in the opening class. We went to both classes. And then when we did some of the writing, we did peer critique. And then at the end a couple of weeks when they were doing presentations, which took different forms in the different semesters.

Interviewer: But then jointly your class would have been working on a similar topic?

DB: For the first six weeks students would be doing psychology or sociology, and we would be working within our own paradigm. And only making snide remarks periodically about the other person, in another time and place. And I might say, "well Richard's probably telling you this. And he's crazy." Wouldn't you say things like that?

RJ: I think at first we joked about something that later came to be a very real thing. Students would also do it, but they wouldn't do it jokingly. They would say "What's the connection? Professor Bernstein, he's saying this, and I don't see the relationship between what he's saying and what you're saying." And you'd have to say "It's coming." In subtle ways even the beginning of the course was taught differently than the way we would normally teach it because I couldn't use psychology as a foil. I had to be sure that by the sixth week, David and I were going to come together. So if I started out with some models of sociology that, say, were very social and overdeterminedly social, there was no room for causative psychology. By the sixth week I had to move closer and closer to the realization that no explanation made any sense without psychology. And then make that bridge and keep alluding to "Well, David is telling you this." David's always present in some way and I am present in David's class in some way—as a presence for the discipline.

Interviewer: Oh, that's very interesting. You're saying, then, that in the normal course of events he would be a foil, or that discipline would be a foil, but you distanced it, and you concentrated on your own. And whether you intellectually included it in some kind of topic discussion, you really didn't care.

RJ: No.

Interviewer: So this really forced you to—.

RJ: You had to be constantly aware, because you were going to reach by the sixth week a problem with the students writing assignments where they had to integrate both courses together. So the student is going to be looking for some strategy.

Interviewer: In a way the team teaching then sounds like a more "honest" preparation, I put that in quotes, for what the students are going to encounter in the real world, i.e. other disciplines are going to be there.

DB: Yes, because typically other disciplines ignore each other. You might think about, as I was listening to what you just said, there has been a change in the past year and a half that we've been teaching, even how Richard is responding and how I am responding. I think that initially you treated psychology as a whipping boy or girl.

RJ: I would say absolutely.

DB: And what has happened is we have developed more of a sibling relationship, which is a kind of love/hate thing, so I think now we belong to the same family and we're acknowledging that. So what if he made me mad, right? Richard argues that the individual is empty, there is no person, and we're all made out of discourse. It's a social constructionist perspective. That there are no individuals, language runs through us and creates us. That's what he's telling students. And I'm telling students that there has got to be something metaphysically real about your subjective experience. I'd say, "Richard's trying to convince you otherwise." And there are

all sorts of things that sociology can't explain, like individual differences among people. So I'm trying to set up some inexplicable facts from a sociological perspective. He is trying to constantly trying to imperil, to gobble up the field of psychology. I mean you even use that language.

RJ: I use even stronger language. "Devour" is my word.

DB: So the students are caught in this tension, and they're watching us, like this—[widens his eyes, turns his head back and forth].

Interviewer: Must be like a tennis game, back and forth.

RJ: The first time was especially hard.

Interviewer: Talk about that if you would. Talk about the first time.

RJ: David had come to me by the end of the second week because he had asked some students to write comments about the course. And he said to me, and I think that he was trying to be nice to me, "I think you should take these home and look at them." These were comments the students had made. I took them home and I was upstairs and Margaret was there, and I said, "Margaret, I'm sick. You've got to read some of these. They think I'm a monster. They don't understand anything that I'm saying." They were comparing me to David, who came off as Mr. Goody Two Shoes, Mr. Nice Guy. They were saying I'm too abstract and I conceptualize too often. They didn't understand anything I was saying and they're terrified of me. So I figure—and I really was scared—and for two days after that I said that this is not just about a regular course that I can manipulate, but my colleague knows that they have said this about me. And we're teaching together. I said, I better get a

sense of humor here. When I went back to class, I went up to the board immediately and I wrote Bernstein on one side and Joannis on the other. And I said "cruel, mean, dark, monstrous"—this is Joannis. And I said Do-goody Two Shoes, Mr. White shoes. Sort of like Pat Boone. This is for Bernstein. And I said, "Is he really that good? Am I really that far off?" And that sort of broke the ice. But it did something more, it sort of turned them to me. From that point on they were my students and David lost them. And I don't think that he got them back for the remainder of the semester. They became sociology students. Which is not what our intent was and we tried to break that the second time we taught, so it wouldn't happen again.

DB: In fact this interpersonal dynamic is really what is fascinating. Yes, I was the kind and understanding professor and he was giving them wildness. They were scared by that and they didn't understand it. Then you said "I'm being perceived as a monster," but you used humor and you also revealed what you were experiencing.

RJ: Yes, I revealed my experience. But I also revealed that sociology, and this is my own philosophy, takes longer to understand. It's not something that you can intuitively grasp. And if you can just be patient with me, I will treat you fairly. I was really kind of nervous at this point. I said, "But you'll see what is forthcoming and you'll see the richness of the discipline." Once that was settled, the anxiety about that, then we were back to try to get the integration. Now they are very nervous at this point because they are asking how do you integrate this.

DB: Yeah. And what I've learned, what I'm learning, from working with Richard is to be more dramatic and to present myself in the way that he is. I might focus more on the students, drawing

them out into a conversation and dialogue. Richard's out there screaming—.

Interviewer: And you would disappear as a teacher. You would draw them out and he was out there screaming.

DB: And what I'm learning is that I have to get out there.

RJ: There's also the tension, let's be honest here, if I know that I'm performing and I do perform, I'm noted for performance, but I also know that I am teaching with a colleague whose intelligence I appreciate, and I have to be careful that my performance doesn't overwhelm the subtle way that he teaches. He doesn't have the same kind of style. We are not in here to better each other. In a sense you become more conscious of your teaching and more protective, as you go along, of the other person. If they mention something about him, you find yourself defending that person. That is a different way of approaching something, I thought. And I would admit to the students that sometimes I lose the substance to the drama. I think that sometimes I gamble that the performance will initiate some sort of curiosity, but I know that sometimes there is no substance there. I think that you really need to have some sort of wonderful performance to have both at once.

Interviewer: Now, had you agreed on some writing assignments? There were some things that were supposed to happen within a certain number of weeks?

RJ: Well, the initial assignments were for the first part, reading and writing assignments. There was an enormous amount of writing in this class. I think the expectations for honor students are so much higher. We talk about that when we make the comparison. David has twenty-five assignments and my assignments were not as

many but different in kind. Those were specifically sociological in nature and David's were psychological, and when we got to the beginning of the second part of the course which is the first paper on anorexia (or bodies or weights, whatever) we asked a question, and that question was one written by both of us. And it says that this paper is about ten to fifteen pages long, and it is an integrated paper and if it is not integrated then you will be in trouble. It will be read by both David and I, and it will be graded by David and myself. David reads it then and looks for the weaknesses from the psychological perspective and how that is integrated into sociology, and I would do just the opposite. I look for the sociological standards and the integration into psychology, and I would even say sometimes in my notes "this is a very strong sociological interpretation, but when David reads this you are going to be in real trouble. Because you really have not done the integration, and not done your reading" He would do the same thing.

DB: For that first paper we just simply asked the question, "How do you make sense out of anorexia?" And so we worked with that a little bit. Imagine that someone knows that you are taking these courses: you're taking a psychology course or a sociology class, now you talk about how you can make sense out of anorexia. So that's the stimulus. They write the paper around that topic and the ideas that they are going to examine from both the psychological and sociological perspectives. The problem they have to solve is what to do with these different ways of viewing the world.

Interviewer: So did you read them all or did you each only read half?

DB: We both read them all.

RJ: So then they would write this paper, they would write it up.

And sometimes we would give them all of the articles. In my class we would do it a little bit different than David. He would give them—

Interviewer: A course pack or something?

RJ: I give them a course pack that is over there, it's in the library. But I assign a reading to two students on anorexia or on body weight.

Interviewer: You mean an article or...

RJ: I just say, "You're going to read this article, and when you come to class I want this written out, typed, two to three pages. I want this distributed to everyone in the class, and that is your responsibility."

Interviewer: And are they critiquing it or just summarizing it?

RJ: They can summarize it or they can critique it. And they are giving the students all of the information they need to have their paper written, so by the time they write this they have all of the exercises from David's class, his notes, at least twenty-five to thirty notes from students in my class, a review by me of one of the major articles—

RJ: What they're doing is in the context of some kind of substantive issues they are raising about what they learn, because this was supposed to be a reflection and David and I were just so amused by the whole thing.

DB: And this semester, this fall, we didn't do that; it was just like the rhythm was different.

Interviewer: Now was this the second time?

DB: This was the third time, we did it in fall and winter last year. The final project this year was a mock hearing. An evidentiary hearing on repressed memory: should it be allowed into a court procedure at all? We went over to talk with Kris Mullendore about how we should do a mock hearing. How do you do a mock hearing? And she said, "oh! I have a legal studies class, and we just did a little case on repressed memory. Why don't they become consultants, work with your students." That expanded. So we went from a two-hour mock hearing. . . .

RJ: It was one of those little things where you have an idea about something, and you realize when you've said it that it's going to take the rest of the semester. We had to have a two-hour presentation that included all of the twenty-five students, so we had to give them roles. We had jurors, witnesses, expert witnesses, and defense attorneys.

DB: And they played those roles, and some of them did wonderful jobs. And that's the way the semester ended was with this mock hearing. It's not like we planned this at all, we didn't know this.

RJ: It's like the big one. And it's a graded paper. And so when they got that grade and we moved immediately in. . . . And David and I said, "In lieu of a paper, because we now have all this evidence of how you've done in the class, would you think of doing this mock trial?" And finally when we decided to go ahead with it, we had no idea what we were doing or whether or not it was going to work. And I was so nervous the last class. . . .

DB: We videotaped it all.

Interviewer: And they took their roles seriously?

RJ: They were very invested in the issue. One young woman got very frustrated when she couldn't get her argument out. . . . And there was no love lost. They yelled at each other.

DB: That was what we did last in the semester. We don't know how students responded. We haven't seen the evaluations yet. Our sense was that they were happy about it. They felt as though they had done something significant in doing the course. They don't learn what my students do in the traditional introductory psychology course.

Interviewer: But from the evaluations, what is it that students are getting? Is it close to what you want them to be getting?

RJ: The last two times we taught it, I don't think we had the euphoria of the first time but euphoria was contingent on our own anxiety. But I can honestly say that I know these students better than any students I've ever known. We still laugh when we cross campus and see each other. I can look at them and I can see literally that they're engaged in some way. I think there occurred a kind of curiosity—to create an engagement in the social sciences and to show, literally, that there's a connection between disciplines. When I read what students wrote about the class [in a previous semester], I ran up to David's office and I said, "David, I think this is the way education should be. Listen to what they're telling us. They're saying that it worked." I think it's the way education should work, the way general education should work. In some sense we had said to these classes, "Look, you really can't understand the world if you don't see the connection between different disciplines."

DB: My sense is—I mean, you used the word connection—I think

that's right. But I think it's really dialogue. I think it's tension and I think it's conflict. And the fact that our students survived. They survive it and they say, "I can survive!" They survive the conflict of ideas and perspectives. Not only survive them but have a much richer kind of vision of what any topic is about. Any issue can be seen, and legitimately so, from a number of different viewpoints.

Interviewer: So it's a signal to them to welcome a collision of disciplines, or. . . .

DB: A heated dialogue. And they lived it. And it's not that we told them it was a good thing. They saw it, they experienced it, and then left the other end, and it was all still a friendly conversation. And I think there's another element to it, which is that our own uncertainty made us, in a sense, more approachable.

RJ: Yes, absolutely.

DB: And I don't have to do the same thing I do in the traditional 101 class where I kind of please my colleagues in the field. This is about something else. It's about a true excitement—of exploring and not knowing where you're going to go, which many of us don't get when we teach within the disciplines. And I can relax about that. I'm out there duking it out with this guy Richard, and with the students. And it's really rich for all of us.

Interviewer: This sounds less like. . . it sounds as though the lines get blurred between what the students are learning and what you two are learning. That somehow this collaboration blurs it much more. It's different in a class with one teacher, where that teacher is the authority. And with your co-teaching, it's mixing it up, and it's uncomfortable, but uncomfortable in a good way.

DB: That's right.

RJ: Yes, I can't say to my students, "that approach doesn't count." I've got to say, "how can we integrate that approach with what I'm saying here." It's a completely different mind set.

Interviewer: This makes me think of the bigger issues of collaboration for the university. I mean, why it's not more encouraged. And whether or not you think it should be. It sounds as though you think it should be.

RJ: Well, David's opening remarks refer to that issue. You don't get much from this. You get your reputation and, typically, you get your rewards in your discipline. And even doing something for the honors program doesn't do anything for your department, but if you now start "messing around" with some kind of collaboration. Well, what do you get from that?

Interviewer: Aren't some of the messages, though, that "we want to collaborate more"?

DB: I don't think it's a serious message at all. Listen to the rhetoric. It's politics, and people talk about it, but that's all. Where do they go with it? And what are the consequences? I think it can be deceptive.

RJ: Take sociology, for example. The minute you ask the question of rhetoric, we say "What is the institutional support? What are the mechanisms which are in place to motivate people to do collaborative projects?"

Interviewer: And what did you find?

RJ: There's nothing; there's no funding. Not at Grand Valley. How much money do you get for teaching and how do you reward it? How do you invite new faculty in to define themselves as teachers? How do you invite them into general education? And then you say to a new person, "If you do this in general education, I'll count that toward your tenure decision." I mean, all of this gives it more credibility. And if it's not there, then it's lip service.

Interviewer: Back to collaboration. What have been some of the benefits to you of collaborating on teaching?

Interviewer: I know you said there were other, personal, benefits, such as the joys of seeing the disciplinary lines blur a bit.

DB: I think alienation had been an issue. Richard had gotten a little alienated from the university.

Interviewer: And this brought you back in?

RJ: Yes, I think so. In order for me to stay alive I have to do something different. This was a real good boost for me.

Interviewer: So this was an un-alienating experience for you?

RJ: Absolutely. It reminded me of what it might be like to teach in a small teaching institution where you really have a commitment to each other. If you were teaching two small sections of this course and that was all you were doing. And you might have another small seminar besides. But how exciting that would be, to have your main commitment be on your teaching, to do that every semester and how rejuvenating it felt after you had done something like that.

DB: The longer I teach, though, the less I worry about the ben-

efits to students, and the more I worry about the benefits for me. I am the instrument. If I'm not high, forget the students.

Interviewer: So you're saying, if you feed yourself, you can feed them.

DB: That's right.

RJ: Or you're "fed." If the institution doesn't feed you, if you're not fed, if you're not prepared to do this, there's a kind of lethargy and bitterness and exhaustion you feel by the third or fourth week.

DB: I think we each do that. I can do it by shifting focus. New textbooks and materials, yes, but also by critiquing my own feeling, a reflection of where the history has brought us.

Interviewer: And it sounds like that's been really good.

DB: Absolutely. It's painful, and it's tension filled, but it's also enlivening.

Interviewer: What would you recommend to other faculty who were going to begin a collaboration? Are there definite warnings you'd offer?

RJ: Don't pick someone to teach with who you don't like.

DB: One thing I'd suggest is to write out what you hope to get out of it. And then have someone else read it. That other person could tell if you're doing it for the right reasons. "Why do you want to do this?" I mean, I knew I was going to learn a lot from working with Richard. And it was curiosity about what's going on in that man's mind. And also knowing that I needed to stretch. So I think it's

really important to be as clear as one can be on your motives.

RJ: Yeah. I could give some advice. I don't collaborate with anyone. I mean, I'm a real loner in my scholarship. It's because I'm always trying to think something and I don't want interference. I don't even have a secretary or somebody to take notes for me. This was interesting for me. I just don't share with someone how I'm thinking or what connections I'm trying to make. And when I'm teaching I have a kind of cognitive map, a sense of where I'm going, and I hold it in my head, and the readings are really secondary to the sense of what I'm going to do here. And now I have this guy—I mean, we met every day—and I don't even want to see him!

Interviewer: And would you say that to David?

RJ: Yeah [laughing], I'd say, "get away from my office." And he'd say "we have to get organized. We have to have dates of when things need to be read, when papers are going to be due." And strangely enough, there are these divisions that take place. And David realized he had to take some responsibilities. And I would take others.

Interviewer: So you had some kind of division of labor.

RJ: Yeah, and that worked really well. David's much more organized than I am. And I would maybe come up with some ideas or something, but David would say "I'll arrange the dates for some of these to take place." And we'd organize around those. I mean, we were lucky: David wasn't like me. Otherwise the collaboration wouldn't have worked. There are a whole bunch of actions of personalities here that just happened, luckily, to work out.

DB: I think what I haven't been able to develop yet, and there's a

beauty here, is the sense of paradox that's developed when you put these two disciplines—or any disciplines—together. You speak at different levels of analysis or put cause in one place and deny it to another place. That's one sociology does: it denies that causes comes out of the person, and the real psychologist ignores sociology, but it's such a paradox. And that's the theme I was just beginning to develop in the fall, the mind/body and society. What Douglas Hofstadter calls "tangled hierarchies and strange loops." Things start here and you end up somewhere else in this other place. You start in psychology and you have to end up in sociology and vice versa. Where does the action begin? The sociologist would describe things and say we're empty, there's no actor and there's no agent here in the individual. Society pulls the strings; and we, as individuals, are the marionettes. But we know that position raises unanswerable questions about how change occurs and how people are different. Where's the life force here? If you empty people, there's no life force. That's really what we did in these courses: we raised these essential questions.

Interviewer: And do you think that's something education should do more of: not resolve the paradoxes, but present them?

DB: Yes. ❖