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# The Working Alliance in Teaching and Learning: Theoretical Clarity and Research Implications

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The working alliance has proven to be a valuable concept in psychotherapy research, but its utility in understanding change processes in teaching and learning has yet to be realized. Despite previous applications of the concept to educational contexts, empirical research on the working alliance in student-teacher collaborations is lacking. To address this disconnect and encourage research, I present an overview of working alliance theory, clarify the application of the concept to educational contexts, and explore its relationship to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Potential applications of working alliance theory to teaching and learning research are considered as informed by developments within psychotherapy research.

## **Keywords**

Working alliance, Student-teacher interaction, Student-teacher collaboration, Scholarship of teaching and learning, Scholarship of teaching, Scholarship of learning

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## **The Working Alliance in Teaching and Learning: Theoretical Clarity and Research Implications**

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### **Abstract**

The working alliance has proven to be a valuable concept in psychotherapy research, but its utility in understanding change processes in teaching and learning has yet to be realized. Despite previous applications of the concept to educational contexts, empirical research on the working alliance in student-teacher collaborations is lacking. To address this disconnect and encourage research, I present an overview of working alliance theory, clarify the application of the concept to educational contexts, and explore its relationship to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Potential applications of working alliance theory to teaching and learning research are considered as informed by developments within psychotherapy research.

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### **Introduction**

The teaching and learning process is a collaborative endeavor. Students enroll in courses based on some need – ideally a quest for new knowledge and skills. Teachers assume responsibility for courses based on some ability – ideally a capacity to meet student learning needs. Each student and teacher then negotiates to varying degrees a defined purpose for their collaboration. Once they begin the course, they each engage in behaviors designed to help the student progress towards these goals. Purposeful work forms the core of this interaction. In turn, this work gives rise to a working alliance between student and teacher.

The working alliance concept has a rich tradition in psychotherapy literature. Several factors have contributed to it becoming one of the most popular topics of investigation in the last 20 years. First, the concept has proven to be a remarkably useful way of organizing information about change processes occurring in psychotherapy (Castonguay, Constantino, & Holtforth, 2006). Second, practitioners and researchers possess an inherent and growing sensitivity to the interpersonal and relational components of psychotherapy (Safran & Muran, 2006). Third, research has consistently shown the working alliance to be among the most robust predictors of psychotherapy outcome (Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000).

In recent years, several authors have taken interest in potential applications of the working alliance concept to educational contexts (e.g., Koch, 2004; Meyers, 2008; Robertson, 1996). But empirical research on the working alliance in teaching and learning processes is lacking. Multiple factors may be contributing to this disconnect. Some scholars of teaching and learning may be unfamiliar with the working alliance concept. Others may be unclear if or how the concept applies to the aspects of teaching and learning they investigate. Still

others may perceive aspects of working alliance theory to be at odds with core assumptions and values commonly held in educational contexts. However, there is substantial congruence between working alliance theory and the aims of teaching and research. The shared emphasis on the process of change, in this case on student learning, demands additional consideration of what the working alliance concept offers.

In this article, I articulate a call for the integration of the working alliance concept into the scholarship of teaching and learning. I begin with an overview of the main components of working alliance theory. I next consider how this theory can be applied to educational contexts, first by reviewing previous efforts to this end and then by clarifying how aspects of the theory can best be translated. In conclusion, I consider some of the potential applications of working alliance theory to research on teaching and learning.

### **Working Alliance Theory**

The working alliance concept is rooted in psychotherapy theory and research. Psychoanalytic perspectives have long emphasized the contributions of transference and countertransference phenomena to a therapeutic relationship (e.g., Freud, 1912/1958; Greenson, 1965; Sterba, 1934; Zetzel, 1956). Humanistic and experiential perspectives have focused on the patient's experience of the relational conditions the therapist offers (e.g., Rogers, 1957; Yalom, 2002). But the most influential theoretical conceptualization of the working alliance has been that offered by Bordin (1979, 1980, 1994). The robustness of Bordin's work in large part stems from his effort to provide a pantheoretical model of the working alliance. He argued that the continued bifurcation of treatment techniques was less important than establishing the general effectiveness of the components common to all forms of psychotherapy. But beyond its independence from specific treatment theories and techniques, Bordin's model of the working alliance provides a widely applicable way of organizing information about the change processes that occur in any interaction between two individuals.

In his 1979 paper, Bordin stated that a working alliance occurs anytime an individual seeks change and another individual serves as the agent of that change. It is both a byproduct of collaborative, purposive work and an indicator of its occurrence. Bordin suggested that collaborative work involves three essential components: goal agreement, task agreement, and bond. Goal agreement involves the parties having a shared understanding of the goals for change. Task agreement entails them having a shared understanding of and confidence in the activities that will accomplish these goals. Bond consists of an emotional attachment between the parties that arises through their work together. Bordin (1980, 1994) later explained that strains in the alliance would likely occur when patients in psychotherapy were given therapeutic tasks that activated the problematic behaviors that had brought them to treatment. He argued that these moments posed challenges for agreement on tasks and goals as well as the quality of the bond. Preserving the working alliance requires working to repair these inevitable strains.

According to Bordin's theory, the goal agreement, task agreement, and bond components of a collaborative interaction uniquely contribute to the quality of the working alliance. Careful evaluations of these components can yield valuable information about the state of a working alliance and the effectiveness of the collaboration in bringing about the desired change. Importantly, Bordin (1979) recognized that different types of collaborations would emphasize or place demands on different components. Thus, working alliance strength is

determined in part by the fit between the structure and demands of the situation and the unique characteristics of the parties involved.

### **The Working Alliance in Educational Contexts**

Bordin's model not only rises above theoretical and technical divisions within the psychotherapy literature but also extends well beyond treatment contexts. The working alliance concept can be applied to any change process that involves interaction and collaboration, including those within educational contexts. Bordin (1979) himself argued that the interactions between students and teachers seemed poised to benefit from applying a concept that "can be defined and elaborated in terms which make it universally applicable, and can be shown to be valuable for integrating knowledge – particularly for pointing to new research directions" (p. 252). The appeal of examining the working alliance is not solely based on the fact that a collaborative interaction occurs between a student and teacher. The congruence between working alliance theory and the scholarship of teaching and learning, presents an opportunity for the two areas to inform each other and thereby extend the reaches of their independent contributions. This point has not entirely gone unheeded. Several scholars of teaching and learning processes have sought to bring the explanatory potential of the working alliance concept to bear on their work.

#### **Previous Contributions**

Robertson (1996, 1999, 2000) has written about the potential for concepts from counseling and therapy to enhance teaching research and practice. Notably, he argued that viewing the teacher-student interaction as an educational helping relationship could be particularly useful for educators. Robertson asserted that teachers who facilitate student learning, rather than simply convey information, elevate the importance of the interpersonal relationship involved. Koch (2004), in seeking to apply Bordin's theory, outlined four tactics teachers can adopt to build a strong working alliance with students: 1) behaving in ways that promote good bonds; 2) establishing meaningful goals; 3) assigning thoughtful, clearly explained tasks; and 4) encouraging student involvement. Ursano, Kartheiser, and Ursano (2007) suggested that because psychotherapy is a teaching endeavor of sorts, and the working alliance concept has proven to be useful in this context, the concept may have relevance to enhancing student-teacher interactions. In particular, the authors addressed teaching as a process requiring the selection of a learning focus and appropriate interventions to accomplish this goal. Myers (2008) suggested that classrooms are built around social relationships, and the actions of teachers and students that enhance or detract from these relationships have consequences for the learning process. In adhering to Bordin's theory, Myers advocated that teachers utilize the working alliance concept in order to: 1) monitor how their practices impact the alliance, 2) understand how students' past educational experiences impact their current alliance, and 3) adopt an approach to teacher-student conflict that is focused on repairing strains in the alliance.

Other authors have examined the role of the working alliance within the contexts of supervision and mentoring. Bordin (1983) applied his theory to the supervisory interaction, and Holloway (1987) argued that the relationship between supervisor and supervisee may be the most essential component in the learning process within counseling supervision. Schlosser and Gelso (2001) reported on the importance of the working alliance in the interactions of graduate students and their advisors. Several authors have sought to operationally define these specific types of working alliances (e.g., Efstation, Patton, & Kardash, 1990; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001, 2005) and examine their potential impact on learning in these contexts (e.g., Kivlighan, Angelone, & Swafford, 1991; Ladany & Friedlander, 1995).

Other contributors have examined components of the teacher-student interaction without directly considering the working alliance concept. For example, sizeable literature exists on the topic of teacher immediacy, or communication behaviors that impact the emotional connection with students (e.g., Christophel, 1990; Mehrabian, 1971; Sorensen, 1989). A meta-analysis conducted by Allen, Witt, and Wheelles (2006) indicated that immediacy likely has a direct impact on student motivation, which contributes to increased learning. Less attention has been given to the related yet broader notion of rapport building in the classroom. Rapport is established when teachers convey to students, through various means, that are interested in and care about them, and that this concern translates into a desire to help them learn (Lowman, 2000). Undergraduate students indicate a belief that the experience of rapport with a teacher increases their positive feelings about the subject matter and pro-academic behaviors (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005).

### **Translating Working Alliance Theory to Teaching and Learning**

The literature offered to date on the role of alliance, immediacy, and rapport, in various educational contexts has laid an important foundation. As these authors have suggested, a better understanding of the role of collaborative interactions in these settings has the potential to improve teaching effectiveness and student learning. But previous authors have adopted divergent models and understandings of the working alliance concept. Although some reference Bordin's model and incorporate key elements from it, these contributions often fail to clearly articulate what exactly the working alliance is and how it functions in this particular setting. Without a more unified model of the working alliance as it occurs in educational contexts, scholars of teaching and learning seem unlikely to conduct empirical research on the topic. To address this problem, closer examination of how Bordin's theory translates into an educational context is warranted.

Following Bordin's model, all teaching and learning activities can be assumed to have embedded working alliances. This occurs solely as a result of a student seeking some type of change (e.g., learning, skill acquisition) and a teacher serving as the agent of that change (e.g., crafting learning outcomes, designing tasks to foster learning). Certainly students differ in the type of change they seek, but the nature of the collaboration remains the same. It will involve negotiation with varying levels of clarity and agreement about the goals of the interaction and the tasks that will be used to achieve those goals. In addition, some type of emotional bond will be created in the process. Variations in the bond occur as a product of the specific learning context and the unique characteristics of the student and teacher brought to bear on that context. The working alliance that emerges is far from stable. It shifts in response to changes in the goal and task agreement and the bond, as well as to happenings within the collaboration. As a result, the development of a strong working alliance is crucial but so is its maintenance. Strains, or perhaps even full ruptures, can occur at any point for a host of reasons. Lastly, despite the strong mutuality of the alliance building process, the teacher in these interactions carries three responsibilities that the student does not: 1) serving as the expert who will facilitate change in the student, 2) being aware of the working alliance and its potential role in the change process, and 3) being responsible for monitoring and addressing strains in the working alliance.

Adhering to Bordin's model has many advantages for exploring the working alliance concept in educational contexts. However, two important issues may remain in the minds of scholars that require further clarification: 1) how does the alliance differ from the relationship between teacher and student, and 2) if alliance is proposed to be essential to student learning, what role does technique or pedagogy play? Previous attempts to apply the working alliance concept to teaching and learning have often failed to address these issues

directly, or they have discussed the topics in such a way as to imply that the relationship and alliance are synonymous and/or that the value of technique is diminished by the importance of alliance. Such ideas are inconsistent with Bordin's model and serve as barriers to promoting interest and empirical research on the working alliance concept.

The confusion of the working alliance with the relationship is a common problem in psychotherapy research. Hatcher and Barends (2006) offered a critique of this literature asserting that it had lost sight of the key elements of the working alliance by treating it as the overall relationship or emotional climate. In applying Bordin's model to an educational context, the working alliance must be recognized as distinct from the relationship between teacher and student. Although the relationship that exists likely has significant bearing on the bond, this is but one component of the working alliance. The alliance arises as a result of the teacher and student engaging each other in a collaborative endeavor. It indicates that work is occurring in the interaction, not that a relationship exists (Hatcher & Barends). In fact, Bordin's model suggests that many different types of relationships occur in the absence of a working alliance. Only interactions that focus on a change process in which active work is carried out generate a working alliance.

The error of assuming that the importance of the working alliance overrides the role of technique has also emerged in the psychotherapy literature. But according to Bordin's model, alliance exists separate from technique. The goals and tasks specific to a collaborative endeavor do affect the strength and resiliency of the working alliance, but it occurs independent of the techniques being used to facilitate change. Although Bordin (1979) was less clear as to whether the alliance itself had the capacity to bring about change, extensions of his work have since argued that technique remains the primary factor and that alliance makes it possible for techniques to be effective (e.g., Hatcher & Barends, 2006; Safran & Muran, 2006). In an educational context, sound technique and pedagogy can be understood to support and facilitate strong working alliances by engaging students in purposive work. In turn, strong working alliances support the use of technique by ensuring that students are motivated, engaged, willing to trust the teacher, and capable of persevering through setbacks.

### **Research Applications**

The integration of working alliance research and the scholarship of teaching and learning is a logical union. The approaches share an emphasis on change processes, particularly on gathering empirical evidence of the outcome of interventions. While the alliance literature has focused on treatment outcomes of improved functioning, its findings could be easily translated to the teaching and learning literature's focus on the outcome of student learning. The approaches also overlap in emphasizing the components that facilitate and support change in their respective contexts. In fact, the scholarship of teaching and learning already includes scientific inquiries into components related to the working alliance. For example, researchers have long been interested in the goals that emerge between teachers and students, or course learning objectives and outcomes. Tasks components of the learning process have perhaps received the most attention in the literature as established and new pedagogical techniques are evaluated and tested. As a result, the working alliance concept seems to hold strong potential for organizing complex information about the change processes in teaching and learning.

Examining the working alliance in educational contexts will first require reliable and valid measures of the construct. While a few measures have been developed for supervision and

mentoring contexts (e.g., Efstation et al., 1990; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001), none have emerged that assess the alliance in student-teacher interactions. As Myers (2008) suggested, the numerous measures of alliance in the psychotherapy literature could provide direction for the development of new measures for educational contexts. However, many of the existing measures were constructed without clear theoretical foundations or a guiding rationale for item content (Elvins & Green, 2008; Hatcher & Barends, 2006). As a result, some may not accurately capture the working alliance concept in practice. To avoid a repetition of these problems, alliance measures created for educational settings must be developed within a clearly articulated theoretical framework.

With sound measures in hand, scholars of teaching and learning could turn their attention to establishing what role the working alliance plays in student learning. Although the psychotherapy literature has provided evidence of a link between alliance strength and treatment outcome, a parallel relationship cannot be presumed to exist in educational contexts. Even if research reveals a link between student-teacher working alliance and student learning outcomes, understanding the mechanisms and nature of such a relationship will be critical. Individuals engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning will be in excellent position to contribute to this type of inquiry since the role of the working alliance in a variety of teaching effectiveness and learning outcome issues will need to be considered. For example, as courses vary in terms of their content, level of difficulty, and method of delivery, they will both produce and require different types of working alliances. Although the underlying goal of learning will remain the same, the specific learning outcomes (goals), pedagogical techniques (tasks), and interpersonal and relational factors (bond) that give rise to the alliance and support learning will vary. Some courses may rely more heavily on goal or task agreement. Others may emphasize a particular type of bond. Others may be more prone to producing strains that require repair. Basic research on the working alliance in educational contexts will need to investigate these natural variations and their relationship to student change. Research that illuminates these differences and their impact will prove helpful to teachers as they design their courses and strive to facilitate student learning.

Teaching and learning research that is informed by the working alliance concept will also be less prone to examine the goals, tasks, and bond components in isolation from each other. For example, investigations of teaching techniques may begin to recognize that the effectiveness of a particular approach, as well as student perceptions of it, is dependent upon the strength of the working alliance. Although working alliance theory recognizes the primacy of technique for creating change, technique in the absence of a strong alliance is unlikely to yield desired outcomes. In essence, the use of the working alliance concept as a means of organizing information about change processes occurring in educational contexts will necessitate a fuller appreciation for and accounting of how the alliance components work in conjunction with each other.

Other research on the teaching and learning process that is informed by the working alliance concept might consider how student learning evolves over time. For example, psychotherapy research has begun to examine the role that the working alliance might play at various stages in an interaction, with early alliances (Constantino, Castonguay, & Schut, 2002) and the occurrence of rupture and repair sequences (Stiles et al., 2004) being particularly predictive of outcome. Similar effects for the developmental trajectory of working alliances in student-teacher interactions might be discovered in the classroom.

The working alliance concept offers an important and useful tool for scholars of teaching and learning. Its full utility will become evident through systematic, empirical investigations that

merge the concept's emphasis on components of change processes with the teaching and learning literature's focus on what best facilitates student learning. As the psychotherapy literature has demonstrated, the working alliance concept can become diffusely defined without adherence to clearly articulated theory. When this occurs, empirical findings are difficult to interpret and apply. By following a clearly defined model such as Bordin's, specific directions can be identified for future teaching and learning research that incorporates the working alliance concept. Over time, establishing a solid empirical foundation for the role of the working alliance in student learning could have significant implications for the practice and assessment of teaching.

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