IDEA PAPER #55

Team Teaching

Kathryn M. Plank • Otterbein University

Abstract

Team teaching has the potential to have a profound impact on both teaching and learning. Many who have taught as part of a team report the break from solitary practice brings renewed excitement for teaching and the course that makes them better teachers. It also creates a learning environment in which students can explore multiple perspectives and ways of knowing. Of course, along with the benefits come many challenges. This paper shares some of the advice gleaned from those who have written about their team teaching experiences to help others make the most of the opportunity.

Why team teaching?

If we look simply at efficiency, team teaching does not seem to make much sense. Why pay to have two teachers in the classroom when one will do? Is team teaching a luxury we cannot afford in today's economic climate? Or does it, perhaps, create opportunities for student learning and faculty development that we cannot afford to ignore? The experiences of many instructors who have team-taught suggest the latter may be true.

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) is replete with articles by faculty sharing their experiences with team teaching. These accounts often go beyond describing practical benefits to reveal renewed and often-unexpected excitement about teaching. For example, Shibley (2006) characterizes team teaching, when done well, as "a transformative, exhilarating experience" (p. 271). Similarly, Rinn and Weir (1984) state that "Team-teaching can be wonderful, as both faculty and students are 'surprised by joy' when they make hitherto unseen connections and experience the lovely vigor of intellectual activity" (p. 10). In an article written over 20 years after that by Rinn and Weir, Leavitt (2006) echoes their sentiment with the commandment, "Thou shalt be willing to be surprised" (p. 3) and quotes Professor Joshua Landy's observation that team teaching gives the opportunity "to teach in a different way, and to learn in a different way" (p. 4).

These accounts make it clear that team teaching has the potential to have a profound impact on both teaching and learning. But what is it about team teaching that creates this impact? Why do people derive so much enjoyment from it,

even if it involves extra work? And what makes it an effective model for student learning?

One theme that emerges over and over again in the literature is that simply working closely with a colleague changes the way one approaches teaching. As Robinson and Schaible (1995) state, "collaborative teaching can help us overcome the frequent sense of isolation felt by many faculty members" (p. 59). According to Jessen-Marshall and Lescinsky (2011), team teaching can help "build deep professional and intellectual bonds with a colleague that are very different from the typical intra-faculty bonds" (p. 34). Typically, much of teachers' work is solitary. They may consult with peers to ask for advice or attend workshops to explore teaching ideas; when they design courses, plan classes, evaluate student work, and so forth, they usually do so alone.

Although teaching alone can certainly be very effective and probably will remain the norm, team teaching offers the opportunity to see your teaching from another perspective. It forces you to articulate your ideas to someone else, to make your reasoning visible, to be open to other approaches, to compromise, and, most importantly, to learn. As Krometis, Clark, Gonazalez, and Leslie (2011) describe, "In leaving disciplinary rigidity behind and considering new perspectives, new and exciting ideas are born, which can translate into exciting new classroom experiences both in front of and behind the teacher's podium" (p. 77). Team teaching requires that teachers leave the safety of their own ideas and take the risk of engaging collaboratively with someone else. Cowan, Ewell, and McConnell (1995) report that their own willingness to take this risk helped make students more willing to take

similar risks, leading to what they call "the very heart of education" (p. 131), a space in which teachers and students alike listen, defend, respect, challenge, confront, change, and learn.

Of course, along with the benefits offered by this collaboration come many challenges. Team teaching can be an intensive—and maybe even exhausting—experience for both students and faculty. So, although the opportunity can be very beneficial, few would wish for it in every class. In fact, since much of the impact of team teaching seems to come from the fresh perspective and renewed excitement it provides, it may work best when it is an occasional opportunity that disrupts standard practice. Indeed, only a relatively small subset of classes is offered in this format each term.

None of the authors reviewed for this paper claims that team teaching is easy or that it can be done without much thought and planning. Like any model of teaching, success is not inherent in the method but depends on how it is designed and implemented. This paper shares some of the advice gleaned from those who have written about their team teaching experiences to help you make the most of the opportunity.

What is team teaching?

But first, a little discussion of what educators mean when they say "team teaching." The name team teaching is used to describe several related structures, all of which somehow involve more than one instructor working together with a single group of students. However, as Anderson and Speck (1998) detail, the logistics of this arrangement can vary. In some models, all instructors work together on every aspect of the class. In others, instructors divide up responsibilities for the courses, either along lines of content areas and class meetings (with each instructor being the expert) or according to the different tasks of teaching with, for example, one person responsible for designing activities, another for grading assignments, another for delivering content, and so forth (Bess, 2000).

Although many would consider the first model—one in which all instructors are present at every stage in the course— to be the ideal, financial practicalities may lead to some modifications. For example, Furman University moved from this traditional model to "clustering." The team of teachers still designs the course together, but instead of all meeting together for every class session, they divide the course into sections. The sections meet separately twice a week, and then once a week all come together for an integrative lab (personal communication with Mike Winiski, November 2, 2010). This is very similar to "the dispersed team model" described by McDaniel and Colarulli (1997), in which a team of faculty divides a large class into smaller sections. Some days the sections meet separately so they can discuss the material in smaller groups, and some days all faculty and students meet together as a whole class to share ideas

and explore integration and intersections. Although some meetings are separate, the team works together to design, evaluate, and implement the course. This model offers a way to achieve some of the benefits of team teaching and integration without incurring higher staffing costs.

Technology also offers some solutions that may make team teaching more cost-effective by opening up the definition of the "classroom." Teachers no longer need to be in the same room to be team teaching (Strohschen & Heaney, 2000). For example, in the dispersed team model described above, a course management system (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas, Desire2Learn) can provide a shared common space online where instructors function as a team even if they individually meet face-to-face with different sections of students. Technology tools also introduce the possibility for teaching teams that cross institutional boundaries. For example, with synchronous web conferencing tools (such as Connect or Collaborate), two instructors at different universities could co-teach a course. Web 2.0 tools that enable collaborative writing and online interaction (wikis, document sharing services, etc.) also offer possibilities that expand traditional ideas of what team teaching looks like. A good example of the potential of such inter-campus collaborations is Sunoikisis (http://sunoikisis.org), a national consortium of classics programs. Faculty from over 70 institutions collaborate to plan and teach interdisciplinary and cross-institutional courses using a combination of online and face-to-face components.

So which classes are or should be team-taught? As with any teaching method, it is important to consider the rationale for using it in a particular course. Perhaps the most frequent use of team teaching is for interdisciplinary courses. In fact, much of the literature on team teaching focuses on the benefits of interdisciplinarity (Davis, 1995; Haynes, 2002). Consequently, team teaching is often used in first-year seminars, senior capstones, or other courses in the curriculum designed to encourage integration. For example, Liao and Worth (2011) taught a first-year seminar that was part of a revised general education curriculum at Furman University designed to bring "a greater variety of intellectual perspectives into meaningful dialogue with one another" (The Curriculum Review Committee at Furman University, p. 7), while Jessen-Marshall and Lescinsky (2011) taught an upper-level course that was part of the Integrative Studies curriculum at Otterbein University.

Although bringing together faculty from different disciplines is one natural rationale for team teaching, it can also serve well in courses that require multiple perspectives of a different sort. For example, courses on topics of diversity and identity are sometimes team taught so that the team members bring their own diversity to the class (Anderson & Speck, 1998; Letterman & Dugan, 2004; Ouellett & Fraser, 2011), with the hope that modeling interaction can be a lesson in itself. As Ouellett and Fraser (2011) observe, "Perhaps the most unanticipated outcome of our teaching has been the

discovery that, from our students' perspective, observing our daily interactions and relationship as colleagues was more important to their learning than the formal curriculum" (pp. 81–82). Another possibility is service-learning courses or community engagement programs in which one or more of the instructors may be a leader from a community organization (Eisen, 2000; Richter & Thomas, 2011).

Lessons Learned

Team teaching has many exciting possibilities, but it also introduces new challenges to teaching. As students often complain when assigned collaborative learning, instructors sometimes find it easier to work by themselves. But some lessons gleaned from the accounts of those who have taught successfully (and sometimes less successfully) as part of a team can help overcome some of the challenges and make the most of the team teaching experience.

Don't expect to save time…but value what you gain from the time invested

There are many good reasons to team teach. Reducing teaching time is not one of them. Many people enter into team teaching with the misperception that it will divide the workload of teaching in half; however, in this case many hands do not make light work. The authors reviewed for this article are unanimous in warning that team teaching—if done well—takes more, not less, time. Teaching as a team adds new layers to the instructional process. Not only must you plan and deliver your classes, you must also work with another person to coordinate your teaching, integrate your plans, discuss how you will assess student work, and so forth. Otherwise, team teaching can result in confusion and tension among students and between instructors.

However, many have found that it is precisely in this extra work where some of team teaching's greatest benefits are generated. When teaching alone, experienced teachers sometimes save time by slipping into a kind of automaticity, repeating courses and assignments without always taking the time to reflect on the question of "why am I teaching this way?" According to Robinson and Schaible (1995), "Collaborative teaching encourages us to check our ingrained tendency to slip back into the banking mode of teaching with the student as passive receptacle" (p. 59). Explaining methods to and answering questions from a peer can lead to new insights and ideas and improved teaching. As Jessen-Marshall reflects,

> I probably spend twice as much time preparing my lectures because I know if I leave a hole, or misrepresent something because I've hurried, he'll be there to question me and make me rethink and rephrase the details more carefully. At first, this was incredibly intimidating, but now I've come to appreciate it. … I'm more reflective about all of my teaching (Jessen-Marshall & Lescinsky, 2011, p. 30).

Know why you're doing it…and share your reasons with the students

Shibley (2006) recommends that the "team-taught course is usually being taught collaboratively for good reasons, so the collaborators need to make explicit these reasons and how the collaboration meshes with the learning objectives for the course" (p. 272). This is probably good advice for any course, but is particularly true for a method such as team teaching that may violate students' expectations for how a class works. Most students are more familiar with courses taught by one instructor, so they may enter a team-taught course with questions and, if those questions are left unanswered, are likely to make up their own answers.

How does the team teaching model support the goals of the course? Often, as described above, the model encourages interdisciplinary discourse, exposes instructors and students to multiple paradigms, and enables them to explore the intersections of different ways of knowing (Duchovic, 2011, p. 98). In some cases, team teaching brings diverse perspectives and teaching styles to a course, providing "models of professional disagreement" and "models of mutual respect" (Anderson & Speck, 1998, p. 681).

Whatever the rationale for a team-taught course is, however, one cannot assume that students understand the reason or how it impacts their learning. In fact, they may see team teaching as two teachers splitting the workload, or, worse, complicating the class for them. If students are to benefit from the collaboration, they need to understand why it is there and how it works. Take the time—not only on the first day, but throughout the course—to explain how the team teaching structure will help them reach the course learning goals. If, for example, the course is interdisciplinary, build in time and activities to help students recognize both the different disciplinary perspectives and how they interact. When planning content, follow Robinson and Schaible's (1995) advice to "choose materials that 'speak to one another' versus just choosing materials from different areas on the same topic" (p. 57).

Get to know each other as teachers…and help students get to know you as a team

Team teaching means not only spending a lot of time with a peer, but also compromising with them and trusting them. In a career often based on individual effort, such collaboration can be difficult (just as it is difficult for students when we ask them to work together and trust each other in collaborative assignments). Instructors, then, need to get to know and understand each other as teachers. Talk ahead of time about your different teaching styles. Share your teaching philosophy, preferred teaching methods, and approaches to assessment (Robinson & Schaible, 1995). Explore your individual disciplinary frameworks and how they come together in the course topic. Talk about your areas of expertise and also where you may feel less secure. Some have found it useful to attend teaching development events or conferences

together (Jessen-Marshall & Lescinsky, 2011) or to sit in on each other's classes prior to teaching together (Liao & Worth, 2011).

Instructors should also discuss ahead of time how they will share the class time and what their expectations are for interaction. For example, if one person is taking the lead on a certain day, what role is expected of the other teacher in the room? Should one jump in with contrasting views, or try to get the other's attention more subtly? How closely do you expect each other to follow the lesson plan? How will you each respond to student questions? Robinson and Schaible (1995) argue for the importance of "reading each other during class" and of being "prepared to offer one another (and to receive) pre-arranged signals" (p. 58). Agreeing on matters such as these ahead of time can prevent misunderstandings and erroneous assumptions.

Likewise, as you and your partner(s) work out your relationship, allow the students to get to know you both as individuals and as a team. Especially if they have not been part of a team-taught class before, they may be confused about your roles. If they have questions about the course, whom should they ask? Who will be grading their homework? How will office hours be handled? In order to benefit from a team-taught class, students need to understand how the team functions.

Plan together early…and often

One of the most consistent messages in the accounts of team teaching is the importance of planning together on a regular basis. Begin early when designing the course. Plan assignments, choose readings (Krometis et al., 2011; Letterman & Dugan, 2004), and have regular ongoing meetings throughout the course (Leavitt, 2006). Some teachers schedule a time each week, often after a class, so they can review what happened and make decisions for the coming week (Ouellett & Fraser, 2011; Richter & Thomas, 2011).

Although planning takes time, it also offers a unique kind of faculty development. Team teaching gives you the rare opportunity to talk with someone who has observed you teach on a regular basis, and who is intimately aware of the course you have designed, the reasons for your choices, and the activities you have planned. Teachers do not often get the chance to watch someone else teach more than once or twice and to hear them explain their approach and their objectives. Many report that the partnership with a team member can be like a small learning community. It certainly provides the opportunity for a sustained and intensive kind of professional development that must be considered when factoring out the cost of team teaching.

Explore your differences…and show integration.

One of the primary reasons for team teaching is to bring multiple perspectives into the classroom. One of the rewards of team teaching is the intellectual stimulation that comes from viewing their course material from a fresh perspective. Students will also benefit from the chance to "observe high-level intellectual debate among colleagues" (Leavitt, 2006, p. 2), or to be part of "a dynamic learning context actively engaging a community of intellects" (Duchovic, 2011, pp. 97-98).

However, students are not starting at the same place as faculty. Whereas faculty may be excited to break free of disciplinary rigidity, students may still be accustomed to maintaining disciplinary boundaries. One can get caught up in that "high-level intellectual debate among colleagues" and not realize that students are viewing it as either academic showing off or simply as contradictory, confusing, or "unnecessarily convoluted" (Duchovic, 2011, p. 104). Team teaching offers wonderful ways to expose students to different ways to ask and answer questions, and to the critical thinking necessary to deal with the big messy questions central to a college education. However, being exposed is only the first step—they must also understand what they are seeing and be part of the conversation.

Therefore, as Leavitt (2006) recommends, "It is…vitally important for instructors to model the process of integration by interweaving teaching partners' perspectives into each presentation" (p. 2). One cannot assume students will make the necessary connections. Instructors can instead support student learning by making connections in intentional and transparent ways. For example, Jessen-Marshall and Lescinsky (2011) discovered that it was not enough simply to offer parallel lab sessions that use methodologies from two different disciplines to explore the same question. Students did not see the relationship between the labs on their own until the labs were more explicitly renamed and the parallel structure was openly discussed in class.

Feel free to disagree with each other…but present a united front to students

Just as teachers' different scholarly approaches to the content can confuse students, so can what may appear to them as inconsistent approaches to teaching. Perhaps the most common challenge teachers have discovered in team teaching is around the issue of evaluating student work. Not surprisingly, this is also an area of great concern for students. For example, Liao and Worth (2011) discovered that while it was interesting for them to explore the very different ways their two disciplines defined good writing, disagreement caused confusion and anxiety among students. If one teacher did not "like" the passive voice and the other said it was okay, to whom should they listen? Who would be making the final decision? As Shibley (2006) observes, "assessment issues may be unclear to students and this confusion can lead to unnecessary anxiety" (p. 274).

Consequently, finding a way to demonstrate consistency and unity in grading is of vital importance. One response,

offered by Richter and Thomas (2011), was to have both teachers read all student work but alternate responsibility for commenting on homework. For larger assignments, each was the primary responder to half of the student papers, with the other adding secondary comments. Although this process was time-consuming, the instructors reported it was important to help them see students' progress. Another option is to work together to create common grading standards and rubrics, and then grade assignments separately and only both read when a paper does not meet the standards. Other possibilities include cross checking grading averages between instructors or pulling a few random papers that both teachers will grade and then compare results (Robinson & Schaible, 1995). An important part of any of these solutions is discussion and communication about grading among the teachers. Luckily, the time invested in doing so benefits the teachers as well as the students. As Lanier Anderson, one of the teachers interviewed by Leavitt (2006), says, collaborative grading allowed him to "understand much more explicitly what the grading standards are that I think are important and why" (p. 3).

Instructors also need to think about presenting a united front with respect to classroom management. Many teachers report that students will sometimes try to play one teacher off the other, or to interact only with one and not the other. And sometimes students' unconscious expectations based on the teachers' ages or races or genders can also play into the dynamics (Jessen-Marshall & Lescinsky, 2011; Letterman & Dugan, 2004; Ouellett & Fraser, 2011). One solution is to state explicitly to the class that all decisions about the class will be made jointly. Similarly, some have found it useful to hold joint office hours and/or to respond jointly to all student emails.

Be prepared to learn…about the content, about teaching, and about yourself

The goal of offering a team-taught course is almost always to lead to enhanced student learning, and the potential benefits for students are well documented. But perhaps even more striking in the literature are the learning outcomes for teachers. One could consider team teaching to be a unique and powerful form of professional development, leading to gains in both scholarly knowledge and teaching skills. As Shibley (2006) says, "Teachers are continually learning; collaborating seems an ideal way to continue the learning process" (p. 274).

Teachers hope that bringing multiple perspectives to a class will improve student learning, but they also find that exploring those different perspectives improves their own understanding of the content. At the most fundamental level, "a basic understanding of the vocabulary and fundamentals of fellow instructors' disciplines is necessary" (Krometis et al., p. 77). Team teaching can also lead to deeper scholarly connections and discoveries. Jessen-Marshall and Lescinsky (2011) recount how their teaching collaboration led them to "share interpretation of and amazement at new findings in a scholarly way" (p. 34) and to form a more scholarly collaboration.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, those who have taught as part of a team report learning much about teaching in general, and more specifically about their own teaching. Robinson and Schaible (1995) state that, "We have found that the collaborative arrangement spurs each partner to locate, share, and experiment with fresh ideas for structuring class sessions, creating more effective writing assignments, and improving our skills at critiquing student papers" (p. 59). Many of the teachers referenced in this article echo the sentiment that collaborating with peers in team teaching— along with all the questioning, negotiating, explaining, and reflecting that comes with that collaboration—has made them better teachers, not just in the team-taught course but in their other classes as well. As Eisen (2000) concludes, "At their best, teaching teams are model learning communities that generate synergy through collaboration" (p. 12).

Perhaps it is this opportunity to learn that makes team teaching so desirable, despite its many challenges. To be part of an engaged, stimulating learning community of peers and students is a goal many faculty have when entering higher education. The chance to teach as part of a team provides one way to achieve this goal. It is fitting to end with Shibley's (2006) closing words: "If learning is of paramount importance to a college teacher, then all teachers should seriously consider embarking on a collaborative teaching trip" (p. 274).

Kathryn M. Plank, PhD, is Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Otterbein University. She has been working in faculty development for over twenty years and has taught both English and education. Her current scholarship focuses on program assessment, diversity, online learning, course design, and team teaching. She has enjoyed many team teaching experiences during her years as a college teacher, and in 2011 edited the book, Team Teaching: Across the Disciplines, Across the Academy.

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