

# Better together: Co-teaching in undergraduate applied psychology courses

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*This study examined co-teaching – two teachers collaboratively leading one course – in undergraduate applied psychology courses. Previous research has established potential benefits of co-teaching on student success; however, none have examined students’ perspectives on co-teaching in applied psychology courses. The present study hypothesized that students would report more benefits than drawbacks to co-teaching. For this purpose, 50 college students aged 18 to 25 completed an online questionnaire after completing one of two co-taught applied psychology courses in the United States. Results revealed that students perceived more benefits to co-teaching than drawbacks, and this difference was statistically significant. Additional findings suggest that students believe co-teaching to be beneficial, and most report a preference for it. Consensual qualitative coding further revealed that ‘diversity of instructor perspectives’ was the most commonly reported benefit, as related to course content, and the most commonly reported drawback, as related to course management. Study limitations and implications for future research and teaching were also considered.*

**Keywords:** Co-teaching, collaborative teaching, team teaching, applied psychology, higher education, undergraduate, college students.

**W**HEN THINKING of a traditional college classroom, one may envision a professor and a lecture hall of students. An alternative to this arrangement is having more than one instructor in the classroom. While discussions and examples of co-teaching can be identified relatively far back in the literature (e.g. Ware & Gardner, 1978), few studies have examined the benefits of co-teaching from the student’s perspective. Confucius himself noticed the value of pluralistic instruction, stating: ‘Out walking with two companions, I’m sure to be in my teacher’s company’ (Hinton & Bullon, 2014, p.60).

The authors of this study note that Confucius shared the above observation from the all-important perspective of the student, and it is this same perspective, the experience of the student, that is investigated in this study. The question we attempt to answer is, ‘What are students’ perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of co-teaching, having just experienced this model in the classroom?’ By exploring these perceptions, our hope

is to further the conversation, adding to the body of knowledge on the potential value of co-teaching in higher education.

Collaborative teaching or co-teaching has been most frequently discussed in terms of special education in schooling below the college level (Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Murphy & Martin, 2015). More recently, co-teaching or team teaching has been used and studied in higher education (Bacharach et al., 2008) across various disciplines including education (e.g. Bacharach et al., 2008), marketing (e.g. Higgins & Litzenberg, 2015), and social work (e.g. Zapf et al., 2011). Surprisingly, examples of co-teaching in higher education for psychology are limited. Most of the psychology research about co-teaching focuses on educational psychology and the partnership of classroom teachers and special education teachers in pre-college settings (e.g. Simpson et al., 2014; Takala & Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012). Only one example of team teaching in a college level introduction to psychology class was identified (Ware & Gardner, 1978).

Co-teaching has been utilised in higher education for various reasons. These reasons have included to increase consistency across multiple offerings of the same course (Carter et al., 2011), to increase consistency across courses (Zapf et al., 2011), and to improve course content by bringing in collaborators with different areas of expertise (Cohen & DeLois, 2002; Forgey & Colarosii, 2003; Garran et al., 2015; Gregor & Smith, 2009; Haynes & Beard, 1998). For example, Carter and colleagues (2011) used collaboration to increase consistency among three different offerings of the same introductory social work class. Similarly, Zapf and colleagues (2011) described team teaching to 'integrate content across courses' (p.46). Gregor and Smith (2009) described how a service user and a social work professor co-taught a course on mental health in order to incorporate a service user's perspective. Haynes and Beard (1998) described a collaborative teaching arrangement between a faculty member and an agency practitioner. Forgey and Colarosii (2003) used a model of collaborative teaching for social workers and lawyers in a domestic violence class. The purpose of their collaboration was to teach students about working effectively with professionals from other disciplines.

In addition to having various purposes, collaboration in teaching has been described as existing on a continuum (Zapf et al., 2011). Collaboration at the most basic level can include dividing up the teaching tasks with little to no discussion about content development and evaluation. Zapf and colleagues (2011) describe this as 'serial team teaching' (p.40). Serial team teaching can include both instruction and assessment. For example, co-teachers may divide instruction where one leads classes for part of the course and another leads for another part of the course; similarly with assessment, one co-teacher may assess the students for part of the course and the other for the other part of the course (Zapf et al., 2011). More often, co-teachers may divide duties between instruction and assessment, where

co-teachers engage in serial team teaching for instruction but only one assesses the students (Forgey & Colarosii, 2003; Haynes & Beard, 1998). While at the other end of the continuum is what Zapf and colleagues (2011) describe as 'truly collaborative or collegial team teaching' (p.40). Truly collaborative team teaching means having: 1) an equal status among the involved instructors, 2) diversity among the instructors, 3) meaningful interaction between the instructors during class time, 4) more focus on dialogue than set content, and 5) students involved in the dialogue (Zapf et al., 2011). This method includes collaboration with both co-teachers participating in course instruction and student assessment.

In each of these teaching arrangements described in the literature, the collaborators identified strengths and challenges of the process. Strengths included mentorship for the instructors (Gregor & Smith, 2009) and consistency in covered content as well as evaluation among multiple offerings of a course (Carter et al., 2011). Challenges included the time at which a class is offered and scheduling restraints that may influence students to register for a particular course offering or time (Carter et al., 2011), defining roles among the instructors (Gregor & Smith, 2009), and valuing the differences among the instructors, such as differing backgrounds and expertise (Forgey & Colarosii, 2003; Gregor & Smith, 2009). Logistical challenges were also noted, including the additional financial costs of supporting multiple instructors for one course (Takala & Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012) and the extra time required to prepare and facilitate collaboration (Zapf et al., 2011).

Although collaborative teaching brings many strengths, research evaluating the effectiveness of the collaborative approach is limited. For example, Haynes and Beard (1998) evaluated their process through anonymous student feedback with a sample size of 60 students. Haynes and Beard (1998) found that the majority of responses were positive. Gregor and Smith (2009) mentioned that

their module was evaluated by students, but the results were not reported in the article. Similarly, Zapf and colleagues (2011) did not report on evaluation data. Carter and colleagues (2011) reported increased satisfaction based on their university's student evaluations for the class before and after the collaborative approach was implemented. Forgey and Colarossi's (2003) evaluation was based on instructor perceptions. Crow and Smith (2003) qualitatively evaluated the co-teaching of a nurse and a social worker in a health and social work class. They collected student feedback at the end of each class session and conducted a focus group at the end of the course. Overall, the results indicated successes similar to those described above.

Two studies were identified that have done slightly more in-depth analyses of the effectiveness of instructor collaboration. Carpenter et al. (2007) evaluated the effectiveness of a graduate level research methods/statistics course. They compared team-taught and individually taught courses. When analysing a pre-test/post-test survey given at the beginning and end of the course, they found no significant differences between the team taught and individually taught courses. However, when final grades were analysed, the results indicated that students who experienced the team teaching performed significantly better. Limitations of this study included a lack of random assignment to courses and no in-depth discussion of the collaborative teaching methods. Similarly, Dugan and Letterman (2008) evaluated team taught classes at three universities but did not specify the nature or subject matter of the courses. They used a standardised measure in order to compare the data collected in the team-taught classes to a national databank of other individually taught classes. The results of their study indicated no differences between team taught classes and individually taught classes. The results also indicated no differences in different types of co-teaching. As with the study by Carpenter and colleagues (2007),

details about collaborative teaching methods or descriptions of the courses were not provided. Furthermore, details about the 11 classes evaluated in the study were also not provided. While the effectiveness of a co-teaching model has not been fully demonstrated in the literature, authors of the articles reviewed tended to report benefits of multiple teachers. Therefore, there seems to be value in further evaluating co-teaching in order to identify whether the benefits outweigh the challenges.

### **Rationale & hypothesis**

Based on the articles reviewed, collaborative teaching provides an environment where students can learn from instructors with different areas of expertise in a unique and meaningful way. Previous studies note that co-teaching also presents some unique challenges; yet, reviews remain generally positive and support continued use of this teaching method. Although previous studies have conducted initial investigations to the benefits and drawbacks of co-teaching, there remain gaps in the literature where more research is needed. Specifically, previous studies have utilised limited measurement methods. Most studies are ad hoc investigations of already existing data, such as instructor retrospectives (e.g. Gregor & Smith, 2009), student grades (e.g. Carpenter et al., 2007) and qualitative analysis of student evaluations (e.g. Carter et al., 2011). Studies are needed that utilise quantitative survey questions specifically designed to elicit co-teaching benefits and drawbacks. Previous studies that specifically inquire about co-teaching benefits and drawbacks focus primarily on instructors' perceptions; however, the perception of students' experience remains largely descriptive and anecdotal (e.g. Crow & Smith, 2003). Empirical study of students' perceptions of co-teaching would provide a valuable addition to existing outcome data.

Lastly, co-teaching has primarily been studied in limited classroom settings, including pre-college (e.g. Murphy & Martin,

2015) and graduate level (e.g. Carpenter et al., 2007). Additional research focused on undergraduate co-teaching would also be helpful, especially in subjects that would seem to naturally benefit from multiple teaching perspectives. One such area is applied psychology. Applied psychology utilises psychological principles to solve real-world problems and includes subfields such as clinical, forensics, and sports psychology (Lave & Wegner, 1991). This subject area requires critical thinking and judgment, which results in varied approaches and philosophical orientations among practitioners. Deemed as both an art and a science (Ivey et al., 2011), applied psychology serves as an excellent example of a field that would particularly benefit from collaborative teaching.

In an effort to address these gaps in the literature, the purpose of the present study was to empirically investigate undergraduate students' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of co-teaching in applied psychology courses. It sought to answer the question, do students perceive co-teaching as beneficial in undergraduate applied psychology courses? To answer this question, two of this article's four authors served as the study investigators and co-taught two applied psychology undergraduate courses. Using a self-report survey format, investigators elicited students' quantitative ratings and qualitative comments regarding their co-taught course experiences. The hypothesis under investigation stated that students would report greater benefits than drawbacks to co-teaching.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The sample ( $N=50$ ) consisted of 10 men and 40 women. At the time of the course, class standing included 8 first-year undergraduate students, 8 second-year students, 11 third-years, and 23 fourth-years. The analyses were based on data collected following two semesters of co-taught classes at a small, liberal arts university in the United States. To partici-

pate in the study, individuals must have completed at least one of the two co-taught applied psychology undergraduate courses, 'Senior Practicum' or 'Psychopathology and Film'. 'Senior Practicum' was a field experience course where students were placed at a community agency and analysed their applied experiences in a seminar-style classroom. The course had 50 enrolled students. 'Psychopathology and Film' was a discussion-based course in applied analysis of mental illnesses using full-length feature film examples. The course had 65 enrolled students. Both courses were applied in nature due to their focus on clinical practice and utilizing psychological principles to solve real-world problems.

Both courses were co-taught by the same two instructors: a male clinical psychologist and a female counselling psychologist. Their method for co-teaching aligned with Zapf and colleagues' (2011) previously described method of 'truly collaborative or collegial team teaching' (p.40) along the continuum of co-teaching types. Following this method, the instructors' co-teaching approach included equal status in the instructors, diversity between the instructors, meaningful interaction between the instructors during class time, class focus on dialogue, and involving students in the dialogue (Zapf et al., 2011). Primary areas of diversity between the instructors included: gender, in which one instructor is a man and one a woman; and educational background, in which one is a clinical psychologist and one is a counselling psychologist. Additional diversity characteristics such as ethnicity and age were limited.

### ***Materials***

An anonymous online survey was created for the current study. It included open-ended and five-point Likert-type scale questions regarding types and strength of perceived benefits and drawbacks of co-teaching. These questions were created to represent the study's variables, and to provide additional data for exploratory analyses.

**Co-teaching benefits.** Co-teaching benefits were operationalised as the strength or intensity of participants' perceived benefits of co-teaching. This variable was elicited using an open-ended survey question asking in what way the experience of having a course co-taught was beneficial. Participants responded by writing their answer in a blank space provided. Participants were then asked to rate the intensity of how beneficial they perceived their response to be on a Likert-type scale ranging from one 'not at all beneficial' to five 'extremely beneficial'. The variable of 'co-teaching benefits' was represented by the Likert-type intensity rating for the principal analysis. Participants' written responses regarding specific perceived benefits were used for exploratory analyses.

**Co-teaching drawbacks.** Co-teaching drawbacks represented the strength or intensity of participants' perceived drawbacks of co-teaching. They were elicited using a similar survey question as co-teaching benefits. Participants were presented with an open-ended survey question asking in what way the experience of having a course co-taught was a drawback. Participants responded by writing their answer in a blank space provided. Participants were then asked to rate the intensity of how detrimental they perceived their response to be on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 'not at all detrimental' to 5 'extremely detrimental'. The variable of 'co-teaching drawbacks' was represented by the Likert-type intensity rating for the principal analysis. Participants' written responses regarding specific perceived drawbacks were used for exploratory analyses.

## **Procedure**

The online survey was administered through a recruiting email that was sent to 115 undergraduate students enrolled in co-taught courses of 'Senior Practicum' and 'Psychopathology and Film' during the previous semester. Procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Participants remained anonymous because

no identifying information was tied to the results of the survey.

Participants clicked a hyperlink from the email to participate in the study. In the survey, participants were asked to type in a benefit and a drawback of their course being co-taught, and then rate the intensity of the benefit and drawback on Likert-type scales. These principal questions were followed by additional open-ended and closed-ended exploratory questions, such as, 'What is your preference for this course?' with closed-ended response choices of 'one teacher' or 'co-teachers.' Fifty students participated for a response rate of 43 per cent.

## **Results**

### *Principal analysis*

The study hypothesis stated that students would report greater intensity of perceived benefits than drawbacks to co-teaching. To test this hypothesis, a paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate whether intensity ratings of co-teaching benefits were significantly higher than the intensity ratings of the drawbacks. The results indicated that the sample mean of reported intensity of benefits ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) was significantly greater than the mean intensity of drawbacks ( $M = 1.68$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ). This difference was statistically significant,  $t(49) = 12.91$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 1.83$ . Results indicate practical significance of this finding due to a 'large' effect size, according to Cohen's scheme (1988). Thus, the study hypothesis was supported: students report greater intensity of perceived benefits than drawbacks to co-teaching for the applied psychology courses analysed.

### *Exploratory analyses*

In the principal analysis, results supported the hypothesis that students reported greater benefits than drawbacks to co-teaching. Additional analyses indicated that students not only believed co-teaching to be beneficial, as indicated by the finding that benefits were reported by 96 per cent of the sample ( $N = 48$ ); most also reported a preference for it. In response to the question, 'What is

your preference for this course?’ students were provided response options of either ‘one teacher’ or ‘co-teachers,’ and an overwhelming majority (92%,  $N = 46$ ) indicated a preference for co-teachers. In contrast, participants were provided a similar open-ended space to write drawbacks. Although 92 per cent wrote in benefits, drawbacks were only rarely reported, with only 24 per cent of the sample noting any drawbacks at all.

Results of these findings are better understood when considering participants’ spontaneous reports of specific benefits and drawbacks to co-teaching. Participants were given an open-ended prompt requesting specific perceived benefits and drawbacks to co-teaching. Exploratory analyses were conducted to investigate patterns amongst open-ended responses using consensual qualitative coding procedures (Hill, 2012). The two investigators, who were also the co-teachers for the courses, reached a consensus for organising responses into categories. Consensual qualitative coding revealed that ‘instructor diversity’ was the most commonly reported benefit, as related to perspectives on course content (39%,  $N = 24$ ). Example statements that were coded as ‘instructor diversity’ included, ‘I liked the different opinions,’ ‘it was valuable to always have different perspectives,’ and ‘I enjoyed the mixed personalities and teaching styles that both professors had.’ Interestingly, ‘instructor diversity’ was also the most commonly reported drawback but related to teaching and course management style (24%,  $N = 10$ ). Example statements that were coded as ‘instructor diversity’ as related to course management style included, ‘co-teaching can make grading consistency tricky’ and ‘lack of consistency in teaching style.’

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate students’ perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of co-teaching in applied psychology courses. The study’s hypothesis was supported: students reported

greater intensity of benefits than drawbacks to co-teaching. These findings suggest that although co-teaching presents unique challenges in comparison to a single instructor, students believe that the benefits far outweigh any costs.

Study findings were further illuminated by students’ narrative responses, as indicated by exploratory qualitative findings. ‘Instructor diversity’ emerged as the most commonly reported response for both benefits and drawbacks to co-teaching. Students noted that they appreciated instructor diversity in terms of course content. For example, students commented that, ‘we were able to hear two different perspectives on the same topics’ and ‘I learned from hearing different opinions, ideas, and life experiences.’ Responses suggested that the diversity of perspectives related to the subject of the course added to the students’ learning. Most students believed this to be the case, with 96 per cent of the sample reporting that co-teaching was beneficial overall. Those that reported benefits rated them on average to be ‘very beneficial,’ with an average rating of 4.03 ( $SD = 1.11$ ) on a 1 to 5 scale. These findings suggest that most students perceive notable advantages to having multiple instructors in the classroom.

Concerning drawbacks, students noted that instructors’ diversity of perspectives was difficult to navigate concerning course management style. Specifically, comments included, ‘lack of consistency in grading style’ and ‘some confusion over course policy.’ Responses suggested the diversity of perspectives from two course instructors made the organisation of the course somewhat more difficult for students to follow. Yet, drawbacks were only rarely reported, with only 24 per cent of the sample noting any drawbacks at all. Those who did report drawbacks rated them on average to be only ‘slightly detrimental,’ with an average rating of 1.68 ( $SD = 0.84$ ) on a 1 to 5 scale. These findings suggest that although students recognise additional challenges of having

multiple instructors, they view these challenges as minimal.

Despite these drawbacks, the vast majority of the sample (92 per cent) reported a preference for multiple instructors. From the student perspective, co-teaching provides more benefits than drawbacks and advantages outweigh disadvantages. Results of the present study indicate that students overwhelmingly prefer co-teaching over a single instructor.

The results of this study make several contributions to the current literature on co-teaching. While previous studies have indicated that *instructors* see benefits in the co-teaching model (Forgey & Colarossi, 2003), this study demonstrates that students also see benefits. Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that students perceive that the benefits outweigh any challenges. This suggests that for courses such as those in applied psychology, co-teaching may be a valuable alternative teaching method because *students* prefer and uniquely benefit from it. Furthermore, the results indicate that instructors may maximize the value of co-teaching by modeling diverse perspectives of the content taught while maintaining unanimity in course management procedures.

The benefits and challenges identified by students seem to be similar to those suggested in previous research (Carter et al., 2011; Forgey & Colarossi, 2003; Gregor & Smith, 2009). Overall, students seem to benefit from the multiple perspectives brought by co-teachers. They are also able to observe the co-teachers engaging in discussion and modeling appropriate ways to talk about difficult topics. Challenges generally have to do with more administrative and classroom management tasks. It is likely that as co-teachers continue to work together and co-teach courses multiple times, these types of challenges may be worked through.

Some specific challenges for co-teachers to address highlighted by students in this study pertained to issues of instructor diversity regarding course management. Students

noted, 'co-teaching can make grading consistency tricky,' highlighting challenges with collaboration on student assessment. To address this concern, co-teachers are encouraged to approach co-teaching with flexibility, reworking course plans and assignments when needed with a particular openness to alternative grading strategies (Zapf et al., 2011). Students in this study also noted a challenge of 'lack of consistency in teaching style,' highlighting challenges with collaboration on student instruction. To address this concern, co-teachers are encouraged to spend extra time planning and preparing for co-teaching (Takala & Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012). Co-teachers must be patient with themselves, as co-teachers often take time to perfect their co-teaching style. In fact, Zapf and colleagues (2011) noted that it may take three years for co-teachers to become truly effective as a collaborative team. Takala and Uusitalo-Malmivaara (2012) urge co-teachers to withstand resistance and seek administrative support from their universities to persist and work through these challenges.

An important contribution of this study is the use of a fully collaborative model (Zapf et al., 2011). Few of the studies identified in the literature described the level of collaboration by the instructors. Therefore, it is less clear what type of co-teaching was actually being measured. In this study, the co-teachers implemented the five components Zapf and colleagues (2011) identified for 'truly collaborative teaching' (p.40). With this level of specificity to the nature of the co-teaching arrangement, this study further provides initial empirical evidence for what components of the collaboration are most beneficial.

### **Future directions**

The current study makes important contributions by examining student perceptions of benefits and drawbacks of co-teaching. As described above, students found that the benefits of co-teaching were greater than the drawbacks and reported that they generally prefer this method. These results contribute

to the body of evidence that suggests that co-teaching is a valuable model of instruction.

While the study makes unique contributions, it also has limitations. The sample was relatively small, limited to one co-teaching dyad in two courses at a small liberal arts university in the United States. The same students had the opportunity to enroll in both of the courses and because the study was anonymous, it is unclear whether some students may have contributed twice to the overall assessment. Similar studies should be conducted with larger samples and other college populations, taking steps to reduce multiple contributions from the same students. Additionally, this study used a cross sectional design by retrospectively eliciting responses from students in different courses. Other research designs, particularly longitudinal designs, that follow students throughout their college experience should be used to further examine the effectiveness of co-teaching. Ideally, researchers would use an experimental design to compare traditionally taught classes to co-taught classes. The two studies identified that did compare co-teaching to individual teaching found no differences in survey responses but differences in grades (Carpenter et al.,

2007; Dugan & Letterman, 2008), while the current study suggested differences based on single survey responses. Further research to better understand these seemingly incongruent findings would be beneficial.

The general sentiment of students and instructors seems to be that co-teaching arrangements are beneficial, and meaningful instruction can come from these arrangements. While more research is needed to better understand the benefits and challenges of co-teaching, it seems clear that this is one way to engage students and provide innovative education.

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