



# Using Co-Planning Time: Strategies for a Successful Co-Teaching Marriage

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*A Feature Article Published in*

*TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*

*Volume 5, Issue 4, March 2009*

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## Abstract

Recently there has been an increasing emphasis on co-teaching in schools. General education teachers and special education teachers are paired in the classroom to support all students. The nature of the relationship between these two teachers is often described as a “professional marriage.” This article provides specific advice on how co-planning time can be effectively used to foster the necessary foundation for co-teaching success. This advice encompasses standards, assessment, accommodations, instructional strategies, and logistics. A checklist for ensuring that both teachers have identified and communicated relevant information in these areas is also included. This checklist is a useful tool that any co-teaching pair can easily incorporate into their planning process.

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## Keywords

co-teaching, collaboration, lesson planning

## SUGGESTED CITATION:

Howard, L., & Potts, E. A. (2009). Using co-planning time: Strategies for a successful co-teaching marriage. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 5(4) Article 2. Retrieved [date] from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol5/iss4/art2>

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*“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of small fortune must be in want of a wife”*

- Jane Austen

Co-teaching has become increasingly prevalent in today’s schools. As co-teaching is often characterized as a “marriage” between a general education and special education teacher (Friend & Cook, 2007), it seems appropriate to consider Miss Austen’s musings on the nature of marriage. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet must each learn to change their perspective and attitude towards the other to establish the foundation of a good relationship. So consider how a similar perspective change is needed to establish a good co-teaching relationship. Throughout the novel, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth learn to communicate by working through various difficulties posed by their respective families. A co-teaching pair can build the foundation of their “marriage” through discussing the potential and real difficulties posed by their situation and by co-planning instruction (See Appendices for Meeting Minutes).

With apologies to Miss Austen, “educators in possession of an edict to co-teach should be universally acknowledged to be in need of co-planning time.” Several studies have examined the variables that support successful co-teaching (Magiera, Smith, Zigmond, & Gerbaner, 2005; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Though these studies discuss various factors that form the foundation of a sound co-teaching “marriage”, co planning time is a factor that shows up time and time again (Friend & Cook, 2007; Magiera et al., 2005; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Scruggs et al., 2007).

So, while it seems everyone or mostly everyone agrees that co-planning time is necessary for successful co-teaching, how should this planning time be used? The simple answer is “to plan for the instruction!” While this seems obvious, interpretation of “planning” is actually quite varied, and teachers’ individual planning practices contrast both with each other and with good planning practices (Searcy & Maroney, 1996). In individual work, a teacher’s ability to flow with the moment and “shoot from the hip” may work fine; but in the delicate co-teaching relationship, both parties need to be equally invested and have equal status in the classroom. The only way to do this is to, jointly, explicitly plan out and address the following lesson components:

- Standards
- Assessment
- Accommodations / Modifications
- Instructional Strategies
- Logistics

### **Standards**

Since the passage and implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), there has been an increased focus on the accountability of student learning by assessing student progress on state or national standards. When planning a unit or lesson, teachers first need to identify the actual standard that this lesson or unit will address. General education teachers, being the content experts, can help identify the standard and how it relates to the overall curriculum of the content being taught (math, English, science). It may also be necessary for both teachers to discuss how the standard can be broken into smaller steps to ensure mastery for all students in the class.

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### **Assessment**

Assessment should be addressed in the initial stages of planning to help structure the activities and experiences to ensure learner success. This concept of beginning with the end in mind is called Backward Design. Backward Design advocates that planning “starts with the end-desired results (goals or standards) and then derives the curriculum from the evidence of learning (performances) called for by the standard and the teaching needed to equip students to perform” (Wiggins, 1998, p.8). Both teachers should discuss the standard and how they will assess whether the students learned what was being taught. Teachers should think about both formative and summative assessments and should be sure that their common definition of assessment extends outside of tests and quizzes to include projects, presentations, verbal questioning, permanent product, and other forms.

Special education teachers might want to consider how the student’s performance or work will be judged. Is the assessment set up in a way that makes inappropriate demands of the students with disabilities? Will a student’s disability make it hard for him to demonstrate mastery of a skill in the context of the planned assessment? Is there a need for extended test taking time? Will there need to be help with writing an essay? Will there be an oral presentation that the student must give? Both teachers should be aware if any students require adaptations to their assessment process.

This may also be a good time to discuss grading standards and whether or not rubrics will be used to assess student work. We highly recommend the use of rubrics for any assessment that requires any subjective grading. Not only will rubrics enhance co-

teachers’ common understanding of what they expect from an assignment, but it will also make expectations clear to the students. Additional considerations for grading include: Who will do the grading? What items are necessary to include on any rubrics? Will spelling and grammar be important? Will all the students be graded with the same rubric (Tomlinson, 1999)?

One final important consideration in assessment is homework. Though some schools have policies regarding how much homework students should have per night at different ages or how much of a student’s grade should be comprised of homework, it is still imperative for co-teachers to work out the finer points of homework assignments. Will homework be accepted late? How often will it be assigned? What will homework look like and what skills or concepts will it cover? Will homework be graded as right and wrong or as complete or incomplete?

### **Accommodations/Modifications**

The special education teacher should be familiar with the individualized education program (IEP) for every student with a disability in the class. As a lesson or unit is being planned, it may be that specific IEP goals can be incorporated into the instruction. Consider, does the student have any oral or written language goals that might be addressed through writing an essay or developing a presentation? The special education teacher should note these and plan to gather any work samples produced by the student.

Of course, any accommodations or modifications should also be addressed during planning time. This can also be a good time for the special education teacher to address how these accommodations/modifications can be incorporated within the existing classroom structure. It provides a good opportunity for

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both teachers to communicate about the students with disabilities in the class.

### **Instructional Strategies**

After both teachers have addressed standards and assessment, it is important to jointly discuss what strategies will be used to engage the students and deliver the instruction. Special educators do not have any

“magic pills” that make students learn, but they do have knowledge of instruction and instructional strategies that work for learners who might otherwise struggle. If the co-teaching team initially plans instruction to include some of these strategies, more students will be successful. See Figure 1 for a short list of some research-based strategies and an example of how to use each.

**Figure 1: Successful Strategies that Support All Learners**

**Successful Strategies that Support All Learners**

- *Mnemonics* (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2000)
  - Example: When learning the parts of a flower, each part has its own key word and picture. The keyword for stem is “sign,” associated with a picture of a stake with a sign with an up arrow. When students hear stem, they should think of the picture of the sign and remember that the stem holds the flower up.
- *Graphic Organizers* (Kim, Vaughn, Wanzek, & Wei, 2004)
  - Example: As a unit on the Civil War unfolds, students write important dates, people, and events on a teacher-made timeline to help relate each individual event to the unit as a whole.
- *Cooperative Learning Strategies* (Putnam, 1998)
  - Teachers should carefully consider which students are assigned to work together and what is the purpose of the assignment. Is the assignment focused on academic achievement or to promote social skills? Students should be placed in heterogeneous groupings with overlapping Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Rogoff, 1998). Teachers should carefully consider group composition.
  - Example: In an economics unit, the teachers assign groups to work together to form a business. There are rubrics for both individual and group accountability, and the group has a specific task to work through and complete.
- *Progress Monitoring* (Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005)
  - Example. A bi-weekly curriculum-based measurement probe, or ungraded mini-quiz, in a math class provides information about individual students’ progress and also allows teachers to pinpoint information or skills in which students are proficient or struggling. Additionally, students are motivated by charting their performance.
- *Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies* (Calhoon, 2005)
  - Example: Students have a scripted lesson to teach each other, including information on how to give feedback when their partner is correct or incorrect. Students take turns being “teacher” and “student,” reinforcing concepts that have previously been taught.

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### **Logistics**

Now, the teachers should discuss who is going to be doing what in the classroom. Who will prepare the materials? Who will prepare the tests? Who does the warm up? What materials might be needed? How will the teachers work to ensure that the instruction is successful?

Co-teachers need regular meetings to ensure that instruction is being planned; however, they need to meet prior to the start of school. This meeting is critical to determining how the teachers will begin to address the items on the Co-Teaching Checklist (Figure 2). This meeting might be considered similar to a “pre-nuptial” meeting in which specific items are discussed prior to the actual mar-

riage. While in Miss Austen’s time period “pre-nuptial agreements” were often financial in nature (dowry, life estates), in a co-teaching marriage the “pre-nup” is a discussion of instructional/teaching responsibilities.

As part of the regular planning process, co-teachers need to self-reflect upon how the co-teaching relationship is working and evaluate how specific strategies are working. This also provides an opportunity to make any needed changes in classroom routines, unit planning, or classroom management. This meeting is a “snapshot” of the working relationship between the co-teachers. These meetings are necessary for the ongoing health of the co-teaching marriage.

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**Figure 2: Co-Teaching Checklist**

Co-Teaching Planning Checklist

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Standards</b><br><i>Did we...</i>  | <b>Accommodations/Modifications</b><br><i>Did we...</i>  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use the standards as the focal point of the lesson | <input type="checkbox"/> Address any non-content-related IEP goals   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Include opportunities to connect to IEP goals      | <input type="checkbox"/> Address appropriate content-related IEP goals   |
| <b>Assessment</b><br><i>Did we...</i>                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Consider needs of individual students for assignments and classwork                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Start with the end in mind                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss how to provide accommodations/modifications without alienating students with disabilities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Include formative assessment                       |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Include summative assessment                       |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assess in a variety of formats                     | <b>Instructional Strategies</b><br><i>Did we consider including...</i>   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paper-and-pencil                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Mnemonics   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Project-based                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Graphic Organizers  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Oral   | <input type="checkbox"/> Cooperative Learning Strategies   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Presentations                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Progress Monitoring   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agree on grading procedures                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Who is responsible                                 |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Differentiating grading based on student needs     | <b>Logistics</b><br><i>Who will prepare...</i>   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use of rubrics                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Materials   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talk about homework                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Tests   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> How much to assign                                 | <i>Did we plan for...</i>  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> How often to assign                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Seating   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> How to grade                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Roles in instruction  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accepting late work                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Roles in discipline   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Procedures for turning in homework                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Classroom movement patterns   |

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## Conclusion

“Darcy, as well as Elizabeth, really loved them; and they were both ever sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the persons who, by bringing her into Derbyshire, had been the means of uniting them.”

We started at the beginning of the book so it seems appropriate to end with the final sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*. While the two protagonists had many obstacles to overcome, they learned to work together, thus ensuring marital harmony. Effective use of co-planning time can encourage general education and special education teachers to become a “united” team: able to work through day to day obstacles and to experience harmony in the co-teaching relationship.

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## Appendix 1: Co-Planning Meeting Minutes: August 25 (Before Start of School)

### **Discussed Items**

#### ***Approach to Instruction***

##### *Seen as a Team*

Let's put both names on door and bulletin boards

All materials will have both our names

##### *Models of Co-Teaching*

What are we most comfortable with? Let's try one teach-one observe/assist, station teaching, and team teaching.\* We can get to know each other with the one teach-one assist model then station teaching allows us to work with smaller groups of kids. Once we are comfortable with each other and content instruction, let's try to really team teach. Build in time to check/evaluate to see if team is working. Let's plan to check in every couple of weeks to make sure that we are OK with what is happening in the classroom and for the students.

#### ***Standards/Grading Policies***

##### *Achievement and Standardized Testing*

All of our students are going to have to take the end of the year standardized tests. They all need to pass to get their diplomas. We need to make sure that all of the students can learn the material. We better plan to include test preparation in our warm ups. Our unit tests should also have standardized type test questions.

##### *Grading*

We need to make sure that all accommodations/modifications are made in the instruction. We need to figure out how to address late and incomplete homework, class participation, and a rubric for their projects. Maybe we should use a point system that rewards all students for completing and turning in homework. The project/presentation rubric needs to be differentiated for students with IEPs to allow for extra time, shorter writing components, and other issues.

#### ***Classroom Policies***

We need to make sure that all students know our expectations for classroom behavior. Hands should be raised and student should be called on before speaking. During individual work time it is OK to go to the pencil sharpener, but not OK to chat with neighbors. Students need to speak respectfully and courteously to everyone in the class. Politeness should be emphasized. All students are to be polite in class.

#### ***Curriculum/Program of Studies***

##### *Instructional Routines*

We will need to establish the following and let's take turns doing each of these so that students realize we are both teaching the class.

##### *Attendance*

Warm Ups-These can also include test taking strategies and sample test questions.

Homework Collection-Let's do this after we have gone over it with the class.

Exit Routine-Let's have students write in their planners, put things away, and then line up to leave before the bell rings.

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## Appendix 1 (continued): Co-Planning Meeting Minutes: August 25

### *Unit/Lesson Planning*

We need to use our regular co-planning time to make sure that our instruction is focused on the program of studies for our content. The general education teacher will take the lead on content, while the special education teacher will take the lead with strategies, materials, and extra resources. We'll also need to address the following on a regular basis:

*Modifications of the Curriculum:* When will we need to extensively cover specific content? What content could be enrichment versus what they really need to know? What can we modify and still prepare our students for the standardized test?

*Preparation of Materials:* We should share this responsibility

*Who Teaches What Content?* The general education teacher will be responsible for teaching the content (when using the one teach-one assist model) but we both need to teach content when using the station teaching and team teaching models.

Let's plan for the special education teacher to do the warm up and test preparation to start the semester. Later, let's discuss how we can both teach together.

### **Parents**

#### *Back to School Night*

We both need to be there and we should let parents know that we are both teaching the class.

#### *Parent Conferences*

We both should plan to be there and parents should know that we are a team.

#### *Parent Communication-*

We will both do and keep each other in the "loop"

Parents should know that they can contact either one of us, but we will communicate the issue to the other teacher.

Note: We also need to make sure that this works for us. Maybe we should just have lunch together once a week so that we can decompress and chat. There is so much to plan for that it is overwhelming. We need to support and help each other. After all, we are in this together!

\* (Friend & Cook, 2007)

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## Appendix 2: Co-Planning Meeting Minutes: January 25 (Middle of School Year)

### Discussed Items

#### *Approach to Instruction*

Team Teaching Model seems to work. We should probably keep using it.  
Station Teaching is working when we use the Instructional Assistant to work with one group.

The cooperative learning exercises seem to be going OK, but we need to spend more time assigning appropriate groups based on instructional intent and student current level of achievement.

#### *Standards*

Most students are doing well with the sample test questions, though maybe we should provide more instruction on test-taking and note taking skills. The rubrics that differentiate the assignment for the students in special education seem to be working, though some are still having trouble getting everything in on time. Maybe we should try to include some kind of incentive. Maybe we want to use homework tickets so that students can earn something like 5 minutes of free time by completing and turning in their homework.

#### *Classroom Policies*

Most students seem to be meeting expectations and the class runs well. I wish the 2 chatty people in the corner would be more focused on tasks. Maybe we should do a reminder when giving students individual work time that it is a privilege.

#### *Curriculum/Program of Studies*

We seem to never have enough planning time. We need to find a way to be more ahead in our planning. It seems like we are always planning at the last minute because something came up-like an IEP meeting. Maybe we should see if each of us could plan one 3 week unit. Then we could take turns planning and just keep the other one informed so that we know who is going to teach what content.

At least, we are on target with the program of studies. We should get through all of the necessary material so that the students will be ready for the tests in May.

#### *Parents*

Mrs. S. is still concerned about D completing his homework on time. The special education teacher is going to continue to email her weekly with progress updates.

The IEP meeting for K is coming up. We need to make sure that we have all of our work samples and test results ready. Both of us will need to go. Since the special education teacher is the case manager, she will take the lead in getting everything scheduled.

Good news! Mr. P sent an email thanking us for helping out his daughter M with the project. Always nice to hear that we are appreciated!