

## *Finding Opportunity in Co-Teacher Personality Conflicts*

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### *Abstract*

Co-teaching, the collaborative instruction of an inclusive classroom by a general education and special education teacher, is a relatively new construct. As a result, many of the pitfalls and struggles associated with it are still being defined, and solutions are often hard to come by. Disagreements, and especially large-scale personality conflicts, can be detrimental to student achievement. Having addressed that problem during our first few years through the development of pedagogical strategies, we offer other co-teachers a series of techniques and activities that can allow them to circumvent their own personality clashes.

### *Finding Opportunity in Co-Teacher Personality Conflicts*

There we were, sitting in marriage counseling, scowling across the table at one another. Neither of us was prepared to surrender any position or to concede any issue. In the background we could hear the monotonous drone of a lecture about men and women's brains: how they function differently, perceive differently, and how that often leads to miscommunication. We didn't find any solace there. Deep down, we were both wondering what we were going to say to our spouses when we got home.

Nobody had told us that it was going to be so difficult. In fact, co-teaching was nothing short of a disaster. We argued. We fought. We hated each other. It was like being trapped on a roller coaster: the heights were impossible climbs, while the lows came swift and easy. But when our principal tried to alleviate the problem with the aforementioned tongue-in-cheek marriage counseling, we finally found common ground: neither of us thought the joke was funny.

Conflict between co-teachers is one of the most perilous and difficult to overcome scenarios that schools face when enacting the system. We don't doubt that a variety of solutions has been proposed and applied. Some of them may even work. But it's not very easy to stop the rollercoaster when you're the one on it, and maybe it's not always necessary to do so.

By embracing the oppositional nature of mismatched personalities, educators open themselves up to a world of valuable co-teaching strategies that rarely get mentioned in professional literature, including some that might not ever occur to the more "appropriately" matched groups.

The technique that we found to be successful, and a lot of fun, was one that allows us to bypass our conflict: role playing. By assigning ourselves specific character roles that involved large amounts of “pretending” within a structured design, we found ways to work together. This also helped diminish the type of “don’t step on my toes” awkwardness that often occurs in those first few years, especially when attempting team teaching.

Classroom games are frequently loaded with opportunities to play-act, usually within the confines of a review or introduction activity. We often use a variation of “Deal or No Deal” to this end. While there are countless other options available, this particular game happens to be one that a lot of our kids are already familiar with. It also has two significant and distinct roles to fill: host and banker. It makes interaction easy. The teachers imitate the characters (each of whom has very distinct traits or behaviors to mimic), the game has both rules and process, and there is minimal public interaction required between us. One runs the board, guiding the class as they answer questions or complete tasks while trying for the “million dollars,” while the other plays the mysterious banker who calls in (or, in this case, texts) offers to the host on their cell phone throughout. Bending the rules of the game a little, our banker will offer the contestants his or her assistance in an effort to thwart the host’s intentions. This gives them a more active role in the game, and provides students who might otherwise flounder with a chance at success.

Role playing can also be utilized to help adolescents understand character motivations and personalities in a story or novel, and provide them with the opportunity to do a little acting themselves, or in a myriad of other activities (Lloyd, 1998). Certainly, the teachers themselves don’t need to be the only ones doing the acting. Our students are often eager to get in on the fun.

Another approach that worked well for us, this time by utilizing the conflict we experienced rather than by hiding it, was competitive parallel teaching. Even now, it remains one of our most successful co-teaching lesson formats.

When starting a new unit, we split our classes into two groups. Then, we pit them against each other in a series of challenges or events as the unit progresses. Acting as team managers, we prepare our groups for each competition, encouraging them as they face their classmates. This design allows us to play to our own strengths, as well as to the students’. She doesn’t like the way he wants to teach this unit? That’s alright. He thinks her new ideas won’t work? Fine. We fight it out and see who wins.

The students absolutely love this technique, with boys especially responding well to the competitive nature. It can remain a powerful motivator far into the slump-heavy second semester, when it sometimes feels like nothing else will work.

Turning parallel teaching into an Olympic team sport gives us the chance to explore different combinations of pairing, as well. Depending on the class and its strengths, we might split them by gender, ability types, age, or even just randomly. Most often, we look

at the type of teaching each of us will be doing as a cue. If one of us is going to emphasize discussion in this unit, they will draft the students who most effectively learn under those conditions and who respond positively to them. If the other is aiming for independent exploration, then they will look for introverted members and for students who seem to be caving under the weight of constant teacher authority. Once teams are decided, they will spend at least one class period preparing for the match-up. Sometimes, we might have a “season” involving multiple opportunities for victory and lasting for an entire unit. It’s important to note that the teams are covering the same material. They are simply offered it in a different style or strategy. Summative assessments using this method are less than traditional, but the results often reflect the positive student reaction to the competitive nature.

Obviously, oppositional co-teachers can’t simply spend the school year hiding their teeth grinding behind fun and games. Traditional systems like lectures, class discussions, silent reading, and journal writing are all realities of teaching. And, in many cases, these are the places where it becomes easiest to let co-teaching falter. Whenever you have two different personalities trying to lead one classroom you are highly likely to end up with some sizable disagreements. Some of them may even risk boiling over right in front of the students. Once again, our proposed solution to co-teachers who come into conflict is to exploit it. View that conflict as a tool at your disposal, rather than a barrier to success.

We like to start a lesson by discussing with the class what the activity, lecture, or discussion will be about. It’s the usual talk about big ideas and goals. But, from time to time, something comes up that we disagree about. One of us makes a point that the other disagrees with, or interjects something new that creates an unplanned expansion. Some of our resulting disagreements have become, to put it gently, heated, and the first time this happened we were both a little embarrassed. What we didn’t account for, and couldn’t have predicted, was having students come into class for the next session both excited about and recalling effortlessly everything we had discussed. They had genuinely enjoyed witnessing the debate and seeing their teachers present themselves as something other than the intellectual authority in the room. “Okay,” we thought, “lesson learned.” From then on, for several years after, we went with what came naturally to us. And what came naturally to us was disagreeing with each other.

Needless to say, one must walk on the very tips of their toes when debating other teachers. This is especially true when standing in front of a classroom full of adolescents, trying to let that debate foster the lesson. Students with certain disabilities or backgrounds will react very strongly to the unusual display. Autistic students in particular can react poorly if not properly prepared. Having difficulty with social processing in general (Evans, 2008), they can become upset or excited by the conditions of the discussion. Resolving this problem might mean something as simple as having both teachers sit down with them ahead of time and let them know what’s going to happen. We make it a point to emphasize that the debate is purposeful, friendly, and not serious. It also helps to develop non-verbal communicative movements that can be used to reassure those students (Kuzmanovic, et al., 2010). “When I touch my ear with my hand, that’s my way of letting you know that I’m enjoying the discussion.” “When I cross my arms, it means

we need to calm down and disengage.” Not only does this help them handle the discussion appropriately, and even enjoy it, but it sets up classroom cues that can be used year-round.

Co-teachers should always make it a point to maintain appropriate tone, to engage the students positively during the discussion, and to present some form of resolution at the discussion's end (even if the resolution doesn't always involve the two teachers reaching agreement). We required some small amount of scripting early on, until both of us had found and defined our respective comfort levels. And while role playing and competitive parallel teaching are consistently effective and useful, classroom debate as a stand-in for lecture or discussion may not be applicable to every class or setting.

One of the great bonuses to this type of interaction is that the teachers get to model conflict management skills. Character education is both omnipresent and consistently unsuccessful in schools today (Social and Character Development Research Consortium, 2010). In our experience, talking about how to handle a disagreement or argument is nowhere near as impactful as letting the students actually see a real life disagreement play out in front of them where the participants handle it well. Rarely, if ever, do they have the opportunity to actually see those skills applied in real life.

In fact, we find using co-teacher debate lessons early in the year to be remarkably beneficial, especially when we precede it by pre-teaching expectations and skills. By identifying what's going to happen, what the purpose and hopes are for the lesson, and what cues students should be aware of, we can tie the introduction of their behavioral expectations to the lesson at hand. We have found that later discussions benefit greatly from this sort of “lab activity” on skills related to appropriate arguing and disagreement.

Whether co-teaching turns out to be a temporary trend or a foundational building block for an inclusive future, it is a reality of the present and should be embraced by all involved to the highest degree possible. Doing any less is a disservice to the students who have no more say in the matter than the teachers who share the room with them. That some co-teachers will have mismatched personalities or philosophies is probably inevitable, so the development of strategies that harness that fact is as important as the creation of systems that work to prevent it. Our personal experience is that absolutely nothing will produce goodwill between co-teachers quite like success will. At a time when we were struggling, these techniques put us on that path.

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