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Successfully Applying Team Teaching with Adult Learners

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Abstract

Team teaching is a great strategy to convey systems thinking to students, families, and communities and to help learners gain multiple perspectives. Learners benefit from the professional interaction among skilled instructors. This article uses a program of land stewardship to demonstrate the advantages of team teaching. Both the advantages and challenges of team teaching are discussed.

History

Team teaching has many advantages. Team teaching allows instructors (a) to share power with a co-teacher to pave the way for sharing control with learners; (b) to observe firsthand what other professionals do in the classroom in order to contribute to modeling best practices; and (c) to gain insights while co-developing curriculum, planning assessment, and organizing material (Eisen & Tisdell, 2000). Team teaching has its recent origin in the following:

- Democratization of education following WWII spawned a population of learners with more diverse learning styles than ever before and learners who gravitate to alternative educational

formats such as service learning and cooperative education. The GI Bill resulted in more experienced and greater numbers of individuals as students who might not have otherwise gone on to college.

- Technological advances have popularized asynchronous and self-paced learning by making them more accessible through online classes. Partnering with technology experts can often ease teachers' entry into cyber-education.
- Globalization requires that we refine our multicultural and interdisciplinary lenses for viewing and understanding our increasingly complex world. Teaming with other educators can enrich learning and promote critical

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thinking through varied perspectives while simultaneously modeling teamwork among diverse partners.

- Teamwork became a mantra of the 1980s and 90s as business and industry looked to teams to reduce hierarchy, improve quality, and stimulate creativity in product and service design as well as complex, cross-functional problem solving. (Eisen & Tisdell, 2000)

Applying Team Instruction

As most educators know, teaching is a give-and-take situation. We often learn as much from our students as they learn from us. Instructors should be facilitators and co-learners in the process of education.

Team teaching is a strategy that has been around for years, but creating teams, whether in response to learner expectations or as a way of dealing with changes in teaching practice, requires careful thought in order to succeed. While teaming means the partners must reconfigure much of their instructional experience, it can be done successfully. The issues, concepts and social and personal implications of teaming need to be considered.

The Living on the Land: Stewardship for Small Acreages (LOTL) program in Idaho has incorporated team teaching into program delivery since 2001. In this program, as in other team-teaching situations, instructors facilitate inquiry and provide opportunities for learning rather than simply providing “the answers.” Instructors do not need to be experts to team teach about small acreage stewardship. The natural world is an open book for endless discovery by all course participants. As co-learners alongside course participants, instructors both model and share in the joy of learning.

Stewardship education is particularly well-suited to meeting the developmental needs of lifelong learners. Team teaching includes opportunities (a) for active leadership; (b) for curriculum that is relevant, integrative, exploratory, and developmentally appropriate; and (c) for the use of multiple learning strategies and interdisciplinary approaches. Team teaching provides opportunities for partnerships among

local businesses, schools, and communities.

System thinking guides the team teaching model used in LOTL. An academic definition of systems thinking defines it as follows: "Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes, recognizing patterns and interrelationships, and learning how to structure those interrelationships in more effective, efficient ways" (Senge & Lannon-Kim, 1991). Another way to say this might be: "Seeing the forest, not just the trees." This hands-on, multi-sensory, multi-disciplinary approach mimics the nature of stewardship for small acreage landowners.

A simple example from the LOTL program involves learning to identify and manage weeds. In partnership with team teachers, students are involved in collecting and identifying samples in a field setting as well as at their own properties. Students can use online resources and careful examination of samples to begin the process of identifying the weeds. Back in the classroom, a weed management professional or pesticide vendor can be paired with a weed scientist to add real-life experience to enrich students' learning. Interaction with a soil specialist and a livestock or grazing specialist helps students to identify the factors that have allowed the weeds to become problems, encouraging students to think of their properties as an interdependent system of plants, animals, soil, water, and people. Students then expand their perception of weed management from a focus on “killing the weed” to a focus on working within their small-acreage system toward a sustainable long-term solution: healthy ecosystems.

Understanding Team Teaching

Team teaching is often used to describe a series of teachers with each individually providing a single lecture for a course. In fact, team teaching is much more than sequential lecturing or the pairing of instructors, and careful preparation is needed to ensure the success of the approach. Consider the following issues before committing to team teaching:

- How and why team teaching succeeds and how adult education teams differ from teams in middle and secondary schools;
- Selecting the best team-teaching approaches;

- How to get started: defining partners' roles, achieving consistency, sharing space and materials, adjusting schedules, and adapting curriculum;
- The upside: what team teaching can do for you, your colleagues, your learners, and your community;
- The downside: what to do when a team does not mesh or succeed;
- The bigger picture: how experts perceive team teaching, and how learners respond to it.

How and Why Team Teaching Succeeds

One of the most effective ways to keep a course lively and to introduce variety in instruction is to use more than one instructor. We suggest that team teaching, particularly in adult education courses, is a best practice. Whether in a classroom, on a field tour, in using an online class, in using an interactive video format, or in using a hybrid of these methods, there are definite advantages to team teaching.

Team teaching can be defined as a group of two or more teachers working together to plan, conduct, and evaluate the learning activities for the same group of learners (Goetz, 2000). It is "simply team work between two qualified instructors who, together, make presentations to an audience" (Quinn & Kanter, 1984).

Understanding Successful Team Structure through an Example

The team teaching variation used in the Living on the Land program includes two or more trained volunteer instructors who serve as experts, co-learners in a community, and co-teachers who skillfully examine sustainable topics. In adult education, the successful team-teaching endeavor works much the same way and is not dependent on the level of the learners or the subject being taught. By teaming with another instructor, cross training is accomplished and classes can proceed in cases of absence, illness, or changes in employment. Instructors can benefit by trying new media for instruction and by having another teacher with whom to share that experience. Team teaching also

adds diversity of perspective. Whether the team teachers are from the same or complementary disciplines, learners can sense the differences (some subtle and others profound) that different instructors bring to the different sections of the curriculum.

When videoconferencing to multiple sites, team teaching allows each location to have an instructor present to provide a quality experience for the learners. In classrooms with more than three or four learners, if a team teacher is not available, we have found that using a classroom assistant is helpful. With more than six learners, it is essential.

Team Teaching Approaches

Instructors benefit from team teaching as much as learners do since the interaction with a colleague energizes both instructors and gets them thinking in new ways. It also can relieve some of the burdens of teaching and of being solely responsible for learning outcomes. Typically, however, many team teachers use the tag-team approach (see below), and classes are serially taught by two or more instructors. Other, more interactive or interdependent strategies can allow for much more variety and even excitement for both instructors and learners. In some of its forms, team teaching can involve interaction at the front of the class. This alone can encourage learners to participate and see that there is more than one way to accomplish a goal or objective.

There is a downside to this too in that too much divergence in opinion or approach can confuse learners especially with an introductory level concept. Team teachers need to remember to carefully build a foundation for learning based on how people learn; this involves taking the learners where they are, going in depth, and facilitating "metacognitive" thinking (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999).

Different team teaching styles must be adapted to the course and topic and to the particular styles of the instructors involved. Not all teachers will be comfortable with all of the approaches outlined below, which is fine. We should be aware of what we can do well and what we do less well, and then we should play to our strengths.

At their best, team-taught courses can provide some of the most memorable, exciting, and satisfying classroom experiences that instructors and learners can have. We encourage you to explore the following team teaching approaches identified by Educational Development Office of The University of Western Ontario (2006) as possibilities. Bear in mind that some of what follows can be done with invited guests as well as with trained colleagues.

The Tag Team

This is the most common form of team teaching in which two or more instructors and invited experts divide up the course material and take turns presenting it. It works well enough, provides some variety, and plays to the strengths of the various instructors. It works best when all instructors attend all classes so that course material can be kept interrelated or when one course coordinator does the bulk of the teaching and provides continuity for the entire course (see “the specialists” below). All instructors should be involved in deciding on the nature of the course evaluation to be used and in the specific instruments devised to evaluate their part(s) of the course.

The Dance: You Lead, I'll Follow

This is a method that involves fluid interaction between two instructors and requires mutual comfort, trust, and respect. Here, two instructors with common expertise undertake to teach a class together. One is charged with the main responsibility for presenting material and outlines and introduces the topics according to a predetermined plan. The other instructor adds supplementary material as appropriate.

The Specialists

This is also a common form of team teaching in which a course coordinator is the one constant in a section, and specialists are brought in to teach discrete units or for single presentations. This method can work well especially if the coordinator is careful to let the specialists know:

- what is happening generally in the course in terms of both content and methodology;
- at what level the specialist's contribution should be pitched;
- what is happening in the course immediately before and after the specialist's class(es);
- that they are expected to be involved in devising the evaluation of their section of the course.

The Rehearsed Improvisation

This method is a variant on the dance. The two instructors together develop an outline for the class, setting out its topics, the time allotted for each, and generally figuring out the line of argument through the presentation. Instructors can take the lead for various parts of the class, but that does not have to be predetermined. Generally both instructors are prepared on all of the topics, and the presentation flows back and forth between them extemporaneously. Many instructors teach best when there is a degree of danger involved. This method allows for that but with the safety net of the other presenter who is ready to leap to the rescue.

The Debate or Panel Discussion

In this method, two or more instructors pick positions or sides on an issue or problem, and they formally present those positions to the class and attempt to refute the other side(s). Teaching assistants and even learners can get involved in this. This exercise seems to work best when learners are invited to join the discussion after its formal elements have been concluded.

The Animator and the Recorder

There are many types of interactive exercises that benefit from recording student responses on the board or a projector for later use as a way of confirming the value of those responses. While one instructor leads the discussion and recognizes and responds to the contributors, the other acts as recorder and summarizer. The recorder is not only showing the learners what

record of the discussion they might be keeping (that is, teaching them how to take effective notes), he or she is also indicating that learners can learn things of value from their fellow learners. Often, the recorder can group responses usefully to help learners see connections among discussion items. The recorder is often in a better position than the animator to provide a useful summary of the discussion, highlighting its most important points. Alternately, the two instructors could perform the debriefing together.

The High Wire Act

The high wire act method of team teaching is just what it sounds like and should only be attempted by those who thrive on danger in the classroom, who know their subject really well, and who are working with people with whom they are comfortable. This is a version of “You Lead, I’ll Follow” but without the “You Lead.” Instead, one might say “I’ll start, and we’ll see what happens.” Paradoxically, such classes require a great deal of preparation since the whole of the day’s subject has to be at the front of the instructor’s mind. *This is not the default approach for those times when you are not prepared!* It is a choice made in light of specific material that will benefit from being taught in a flexible manner often determined by a sense of what the learners need on that subject at that moment. Usually, such classes begin with an interactive portion that identifies the topics that need to be covered in the remainder of the class.

Advantages of Team Teaching for the Instructor

Harris and Harvey (2000) point out that there are many upsides of team teaching. The advantages of team teaching for the instructor include the following.

- Broad categories and approaches are determined by the instructors based on the needs of students, the subject, and the instructors’ shared philosophies about learning and learners.
- Team teaching enables better organization, a positive atmosphere, and more meaningful participation.

- Team teaching provides a supportive environment, allows for development of new teaching approaches, and aids in overcoming content isolation.
- Team teaching increases the likelihood of sounder solutions regarding class management, augments the opportunity for intellectual growth, and provides opportunities to mentor new instructors.
- Team members are part of a supportive environment in which they are exposed to different styles of planning, organization, and class presentation.
- Team members have opportunities to develop and enhance their own teaching approaches and methods.
- Team members become sounding boards for sharing the successes and disappointments of particular class sessions.
- When team teaching involves interdisciplinary subjects, each member can learn about lesser-known fields and thereby grow intellectually.
- Instructors offering different points of view give learners the opportunity to be more appreciative of their own contributions and to experience the value of diversity.

Advantages of Team Teaching for the Learner

There are also many advantages from team teaching for the learners. These include the following.

- Team teaching can open a learner’s eyes to accepting more than one opinion and to working more cooperatively with others.
- Team teaching provides educational benefits such as increasing the student’s level of understanding and retention.
- Two or more varying views help learners blur the black-and-white way of thinking common in our society and see many shades of gray.
- The variety of teaching approaches used by the team can also reach a greater variety of learning styles (Brandenburg, 1997).

- The cooperation that the learners observe between team teachers serves as a model for teaching learners positive teamwork skills and attitudes (Robinson & Stabile, 1995).
- The benefits of collaborative learning include higher achievement, greater retention, improved interpersonal skills, and an increase in regard for group work for both learners and instructors (Robinson & Stabile, 1995).
- The questions and comments that surface during discussions among team teachers allow learners to hear different positions and perspectives (Harris & Harvey, 2000).
- Learners can build off each other's contributions, respectfully challenging both the instructors and themselves (Harris & Harvey, 2000).

Challenges of Team Teaching for the Instructor

As with any approach, there can be challenges for team teaching. Some include the following.

- Instructors must plan for more preparation time prior to implementation than traditionally needed.
- Adequate training or prior knowledge of the rationale behind team teaching is critical. Team teachers must discuss in advance their teaching philosophies, team roles, and course objectives.
- If not enough time is given to preparation and prior interaction among instructors, it may lead to conflict. As learners sense negative tension between educators, this situation detracts from learning.
- Intensive staff development in the area of team teaching may be necessary.
- While the course is running, extra time must be allocated to meetings dealing with planning the course, agreeing on guidelines for such issues as consistency, dealing effectively with difficult learners, and improving the content of lessons delivered.

Challenges of Team Teaching for the Learner

There may also be challenges for the learners. Some such challenges include the following.

- Learners may feel frustration and discomfort about having more than one teacher.
- The potential for diversity and ambiguity due to different points of view may prove disconcerting for some learners who might become confused by more than one way of looking at issues or grading assignments.
- When team teaching involves two instructors, some learners, particularly learners with attention deficit disorders or disabilities that are best met by repetition, can have greater difficulty.
- Team teaching issues and concerns require a higher level of ongoing communication among instructors, coordinators, and learners.

Conclusion

The issues surrounding team teaching are numerous and complex. No single model or approach to team teaching will automatically result in success for a given teaching situation. Any team teaching effort must be customized to suit the curricula, teachers, and learners. New learners bring changes. Even in situations where the team members are offering a course that they have previously taught together, new and distinct groups of learners will offer new challenges. The different learners will influence the focus of the curriculum, the direction of discussions, and the interaction of the instructors, which creates a new learning experience for all those involved.

Throughout the literature on team teaching, certain key elements appear to be necessary for a successful team teaching program. Members must have (a) a shared commitment to team teaching and ongoing communication, (b) a keen interest in connecting the content or curriculum to real life, and (c) a strong desire to ignite learners' thirst for knowledge. With these three elements in place, team teaching can be a joy for the instructors and a meaningful learning experience for students.

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Appendix

How to Get Started Check Sheet

Developed for Western SARE Funded Grant SW06-039 Instructor Training, December 2006, Living n the Land: Stewardship for Small Acreages

- Define partners' roles.
- Identify ways to achieve consistency, sharing space and materials.
- Adjust schedules, and agree on adaptations of the curriculum.
- Plan together and agree on the following:
 - a. What will be presented (e.g., the modules, lesson objectives) and in what order,
 - b. How the material is to be presented (e.g., to a large or small group presentation),
 - c. Who is to present the information,
 - d. How the learners will be assessed, and;
 - e. How small groups will be organized and which team teacher will be assigned to each small group.
- Agree on operational definitions, terms and examples you will use.
- Discuss if your team teaching is voluntary or imposed?
- Select a team teaching partner that you can work with, not necessarily one you agree with.
- Clearly identify roles in groups of three or more.
- Agree on how you will deal with tension and conflict; ground rules of the community of learners.
- Understand, support and agree to the evaluation and assessment tools defined during course development.
- Agree on the broad categories and approaches (discussed previously) of the team teaching you will use:
 - **Category A:** Two or more instructors are teaching the same learners at the same time within the same classroom;
 - **Category B:** The instructors work together but do not necessarily teach the same groups of learners nor necessarily teach at the same

time.

Goetz (2000) notes when instructors team teach the same group of learners at the same time, there are a number of different roles that these team teachers might perform. For monetary and spatial reasons, this type of team teaching usually involves two partners. Six models of team teaching have been identified by Maroney (1995) and Robinson and Schaible (1995).

Category A team teaching usually involves a combination of these models according to the personalities, philosophies or strengths of the team teachers as well as the personalities and strengths of the learners.

- Traditional Team Teaching
- Collaborative Teaching
- Complimentary / Supportive Team Teaching
- Parallel Instruction
- Differentiated Split Class
- Monitoring Teacher

Category B team teaching consists of a variety of team teaching models, in which the instructors work together but do not necessarily teach the same groups of learners, or if they do, they do not teach these learners at the same time. This category of team teaching can take many forms (Goetz 2000):

- Team members meet to share ideas and resources but function independently.
- Teams of teachers sharing a common resource, for example, the LOTL Curriculum.
- Teach different sub-groups within the whole group.
- One individual plans the instructional activities for the entire team.
- The team members share planning, but each instructor teaches his/her own specialized skills area to the whole group of learners.