

Team Teaching: Benefits, Challenges, and Considerations

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Team teaching entails two or more instructors working together to teach their students. Through the years, this type of teaching has been called by many names, including cooperative teaching, collaborative teaching, coordinated teaching, and simply co-teaching; however, the most cited term continues to be team teaching. Regardless of the term used, team teaching can range from teachers independently completing certain tasks for a course to collaborating completely throughout an entire course. The process might involve two or more teachers with similar or diverse backgrounds, teaching across more than one discipline, and targeting any grade level. Below, we will discuss some of these variations, together with common benefits of, and potential challenges to, team teaching. The information we provide is based on readings in this area, many of which we have provided in the Suggested Readings section below; interviews with colleagues; survey input from team teachers; and our own team-teaching experiences.

When team teaching, instructors may simply choose to split a course, with little more planning than determining which instructor will deliver which specific lectures. This approach to team teaching might involve a single classroom coordinator who schedules speakers, an arrangement often found in cross-disciplinary core courses. In a variation on this format, all instructors are present for each class, but each delivers his or her lectures independently. A third, and more demanding, method of team teaching involves instructors attending all class meetings and contributing to lectures each day. In this format, instructors’ presentations are highly integrated. Finally, an unusual arrangement involves having students enroll in two courses that are linked in some way. For example, students at Augusta State University can enroll simultaneously in a first-year orientation course and a section of introductory psychology. In this “tandem” arrangement, the first-year orientation instructor attends the psychology course “as a student” and helps other students focus on important information, take useful notes, use the textbook effectively, and even prepare for (and take!) exams. As these approaches should indicate, possibilities for team teaching are many and varied.

Eisen (2000) provided a useful analogy by examining team teaching under a family-systems model. According to Eisen, the “village” exemplifies teachers and students working together as a team in the classroom, rather than two or more teachers working together. The “extended family” represents teachers who share ideas informally and support each other. “Cohabitants” are teachers who might combine their classes to hear a speaker or watch a video, and they would be willing to cover a class for each other, if needed. “Joint custody” refers to two teachers sharing a course, but lectures are still highly individualized. A “committed marriage” requires choosing a partner and working together to provide a course that truly integrates the two teaching

personalities. Finally, a “blind date” occurs when an administrator brings two teachers together for a course. Eisen suggested that blind dates might lead to marriage or just a one-night stand.

Perhaps the ultimate in team teaching was best captured by Buckley (2000), who wrote: “Team teaching involves a group of instructors working purposefully, regularly, and cooperatively to help a group of students learn. As a team, the teachers work together in setting goals for the course, designing a syllabus, preparing individual lesson plans, actually teaching the students together, and evaluating the results” (p. 4).

Eisen’s (2000) committed marriage and Buckley’s (2000) idealized team teaching illustrate a synergistic relationship between teachers who want to create a unique teaching and learning experience. Those of us interested in team teaching aspire to become better teachers by working with our colleagues in this type of close relationship. However, certain administrative concerns must be addressed before team teaching can be realized. For example, how will students complete course evaluations for multiple teachers, how will team teaching be counted in the teaching load, and how will it be valued in annual evaluations?

More pragmatically, using two instructors to teach a single course may reduce the number of instructors available to teach other courses. Often, team teachers choose to bear this cost themselves by agreeing to a course overload or by agreeing to teach a double-sized course. However, some administrators actively support team teaching by employing relatively inexpensive adjunct instructors to cover the team teacher’s vacated section.

Indeed, administrative endorsement for team teaching can be quite strong, especially when it supports institutional goals (e.g., interdisciplinary instruction). Further, the uniqueness of a team-taught course may actually attract high student enrollments. Other administrators have touted team teaching as a means of facilitating faculty development by broadening faculty expertise and perspective, re-energizing an established instructor, mentoring a less experienced teacher, transitioning an administrator back into the classroom, or easing an instructor into a new course preparation. The popularity of team teaching is testimony to the fact that perceived administrative obstacles are not insurmountable.

Challenges and Benefits for Students

After the course has been scheduled, challenges and benefits for both students and teachers must be considered. Students are likely to have a larger workload with more than one teacher. Even if this is not the case, students may perceive that they have more work, and they will often say so on course evaluations! Students may also be uncertain of who is in charge of the course, particularly if team teaching includes an equal partnership between teachers. For example, students may not know with whom they should talk about grades or a missed test. In addition, students must adapt to different teaching styles within one course. Finally, the classroom environment could suffer if teachers have conflicts with one another or if they talk only with one another rather than with their students. In addition, unless they are careful, two teachers can dominate class discussion and rarely allow student input.

Conversely, students can benefit greatly from team teaching. First, students have the chance to learn from more than one expert, especially if the instructors have different specialty areas. Instructors can debate with each other in class to help students consider different points of view and to encourage critical thinking. Students might also enjoy the change of pace that comes when different instructors lecture. Finally, having more than one instructor in the classroom may lead to increased student-instructor rapport.

Challenges and Benefits for Teachers

Teachers also face challenges when team teaching. Most types of team teaching require more time and energy than teaching alone, at least in the early stages of a team relationship. Teachers might get credit for only one-half of a course or alternate full credit for the course each term. Some team teachers report that students complain to them about the other teacher or attempt to play one teacher against the other. Finally, when teachers share a course, a loss of autonomy is very likely and, unfortunately, one teacher may feel like (or even be treated like) the lesser member of a team.

As long as each teacher is valued, the benefits of team teaching are many. First, working with a colleague may make teaching more fun and can provide a fresh perspective on how class is going. Having another teacher in the classroom can also make it easier to answer students' questions. Additionally, team teachers often share the responsibility of grading, either separating the work or grading the same work and comparing their assessments. Teachers who support each other can also form a united front to diffuse potential student problems. As an added benefit, team-taught courses make it easy to maintain continuity in a class when one member of the team has an emergency or professional meeting and must miss class. Importantly, team teachers often report that the experience helped to revitalize their love of teaching. A final, more self-serving benefit of team teaching is the opportunity to have peer review of teaching from a colleague that might be used for tenure, promotion, or awards.

Considerations When Team-Teaching

To maximize the team-teaching experience, instructors need to consider several issues. First, choose a psychologically healthy partner; a problematic colleague will not make a good partner. Second, discuss course management, including the amount of class structure each instructor prefers; how to handle student requests for exceptions; whether interruptions by one member of the team are acceptable, or perhaps even encouraged, during a lecture by the other member; what kinds of tests will be used; how student papers (if assigned) will be handled; and who will maintain course records. Third, get to know each other, listen, and compromise. Be prepared to meet regularly beyond initial course planning. Fourth, agree to a trial run of one or two semesters. If a long-term commitment is made immediately, "breaking up" will be difficult if the relationship does not work.

Other aspects of team teaching are based on personal preference. Instructors must decide if a team will consist of equal partners or a senior faculty member mentoring newer faculty or graduate students. The team arrangement could involve only two instructors or an entire teaching team. If all instructors attend class each day, one instructor might lecture while the others watch,

or each might remain active by helping students individually, presenting demonstrations, serving as a student role model (being attentive, taking notes, asking good questions, etc.), or providing an additional resource for student questions.

Regardless of the team structure and dynamics, instructors should like and respect each other, and they ideally should share the same work ethic. Instructors should focus on their strengths, such as their subject areas of expertise, classroom skills, and housekeeping skills. Throughout the term, team members should have frequent, open discussions and maintain planning periods. And even as team teaching sweeps us away to the nirvana of teaching, we should not forget about our primary goal: student learning.

We close with some representative and slightly paraphrased comments from experienced team teachers.

On interdisciplinary team-taught courses:

- I can now better help my students relate our psychology content to what they're learning in other courses.
- Nature is not organized like a college curriculum, and interdisciplinary/team teaching helps students come to appreciate this.
- I have a new appreciation for the similarities and differences in approaches to knowledge found in other disciplines...and the instructors from the other disciplines now understand psychology better, too!

On student audience:

- Team teaching generally works best with upper-level, graduate, and honors students.

On the increased work load:

- Team teaching works best when both instructors carry more than 50% of the load.
- It was much more work, but well worth the effort.

On the other hand:

- My stress was reduced because we were sharing the load, and I didn't have to make all the decisions.
- I had ready coverage when I needed to miss class.

On student evaluations:

- The students loved it, and it showed in the end-of-course evaluations.
- My ratings are a bit lower in my team-taught course than when I teach solo.

On the overall experience:

- Once is not enough. It gets easier and much better after the first time.
- It energized me, and that energy extended to my other classes, as well.
- This helped to make teaching fun again, both in and out of the classroom.

On students:

- They love the “he said, she said” exchanges.
- Students can find their best fit when given more than one instructor.
- Students get to witness scholarly debate...as opposed to what most politicians do.
- This experience facilitates critical thinking by students.
- I can’t prove it, but I’m convinced my students got a better course than I could have offered by myself.

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