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Author(s): Margaret R. Letterman and Kimberly B. Dugan

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# TEAM TEACHING A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY HONORS COURSE

## PREPARATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Margaret R. Letterman and Kimberly B. Dugan

**Abstract.** Collaborative teaching is used in many college and university programs to foster student enthusiasm and inquiry and to promote interdisciplinary learning. A literature review reveals benefits and pitfalls, but it lacks sufficient information for instructing team teachers in planning collaborative courses. In this article, we outline suggestions from a combination of sources, including informal written and verbal conversations with faculty members and our own experience. Collaborators for a team-taught course should talk to experienced others, review the literature, become acquainted with one another's teaching style, open the channels for communication, and anticipate and plan for interjecting and turn-taking strategies, potential power dimensions, and sources of conflict.

Teaching an undergraduate honors course can be demanding; team teaching or co-teaching an accelerated cross-disciplinary class can be even more challenging for the uninitiated instructor. We took up the challenge of designing such a course for the study of gender in

the honors program at Eastern Connecticut State University. The original idea for this class came about in a serendipitous fashion; periodically, we sat in on each other's courses because of a mutual interest in the topics presented. It soon was apparent that the students were intrigued by the dynamic interaction between us. As Dugan presented material from the sociological perspective, Letterman occasionally would offer a biopsychological explanation that would lead to a lively debate. This interaction, in turn, ener-

gized student participation and interest, which led to our consideration of using this team-teaching format for an interdisciplinary honors class. The following discussion outlines our collaborative effort to prepare such a course. We first present recent scholarship on team teaching to lay the foundation for the discussion. Next, we turn to a series of issues that we identified as crucial to the effective planning of the course. We end with a brief summary and highlight key areas for future investigation.

### **Why Collaborate: Potential Benefits and Problems**

College and university programs across the country are working to create innovative teaching formats to foster student enthusiasm and inquiry and to promote interdisciplinary learning. Team teaching, cross-disciplinary classes, and honors courses have been principal elements in achieving these goals. Team teaching can be achieved with different approaches. Two or more faculty members can work together teaching one course, or faculty members can work together planning several classes as cluster courses. Team-teachers typically develop a common syllabus, integrate their various perspectives, select topics, and share teaching activities and lectures (Davis 1995).

According to Davis, today's academics must know "more and more about less and less" (1995, 35). This special-

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*Margaret R. Letterman is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology and Kimberly B. Dugan is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work, both at Eastern Connecticut State University.*

ization in a particular area can lead to the development of tunnel vision. If experts from different perspectives pool their resources in a scholarly presentation, students can be exposed to the strengths of both viewpoints. Students can develop critical-thinking skills by synthesizing multiple perspectives and relating the information to a larger conceptual framework (Davis 1995). The general sentiment is that if it is done correctly, everyone benefits from team-taught courses.

#### *Benefits for Teachers*

The literature indicates a variety of benefits from collaborative teaching for both the novice and the seasoned professor. Those new to the profession can acquire team-teaching experience (Coffland, Hannemann, and Potter 1974); the more practiced professor can acquire satisfaction from learning new teaching methods (Davis 1995) and hearing fresh ideas from colleagues (Robinson and Schaible 1995). Collaborative teaching keeps instructors from slipping into a style that posits the students as the passive receptacle of knowledge and helps to not only create a new style or dynamic but also to reinforce that style (Robinson and Schaible 1995).

Several authors report on the isolation that many academics experience (Davis 1995; Hinton and Downing 1998; Robinson and Schaible 1995) and suggest that collaborative teaching is one way to alleviate the problem. It is a unique opportunity to share, critique, confront, and cooperate (Ramsden 1992; Senge 1990; Schrage 1995). Collaborative or team teaching can engage professors in more philosophical discussions than the usual discourse over class materials.

#### *Benefits for Students*

Studies indicate that students experience a variety of benefits from the team-taught course structure. Wilson and Martin (1998) found that students who participated in team-taught classes reported improved teacher-student relationships. Hinton and Downing (1998) received positive evaluations from students of a newly developed team-taught class. Ninety-four percent of the students expressed a preference for team

teaching over the traditional teaching method. These classes benefit students fundamentally by being more interesting and challenging.

Benjamin (2000) found improved student learning outcomes from reflective and collaborative teaching. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2000) reported higher achievement levels, greater retention rates, and improved interpersonal skills for students in collaboratively taught classes. Students who are involved in classes using collaborative teaching techniques improve their social and communication skills and develop skills of analysis and judgment (Harris and Watson 1997).

Finally, collaboratively taught classes can promote diversity by including team members with different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds and from academically varied disciplines. By supporting diverse teaching teams, the institution indicates a commitment to the recognition and appreciation of diversity on campus, which is beneficial for both teachers and students (Hinton and Downing 1998). Furthermore, team-taught students experience multiple perspectives from the different disciplines (Wilson and Martin 1998). Students also benefit from learning how to incorporate information from an alternative discipline into their own field of study (Davis 1995). Because of the emphasis on disciplinary specialization, students typically must learn important auxiliary material outside their field, either through additional training (that is, a double major) or by becoming more interdisciplinary (team-taught classes) in their educational pursuit. Davis (1995) suggests that students exposed to team teaching will learn to critically evaluate information, analyze and synthesize this information, and learn better ways to apply it through team-taught classes. Students can develop critical-thinking skills by using multiple perspectives and relating the information to a larger conceptual framework, rather than to the concerns of only one discipline (Davis 1995).

There is a great deal of support for the values of team-teaching and collaborative teaching across disciplines. The question is: Why is the collaboratively taught class the exception rather than the rule? Along with the benefits for stu-

dents and teachers, there also are multifaceted problems.

#### *Problems for Teachers*

Experienced team teachers cite a number of potential pitfalls to team teaching. It is difficult to organize and collaborate team teaching; it takes time and imagination (Davis 1995). It is more time consuming to be a team member than to teach alone (especially in the planning stages). Conflict can arise if the role of each team member is unclear or not agreed upon by all members. For instance, is there a team leader, or will all decisions be consensual? If hierarchical leadership roles develop, this increases the possibility of additional teamwork problems. Rothman (1980) suggests that it is more effective to have a single leader for group facilitation, but others (Levine 1980) argue that co-leadership can have better results. Cohen and DeLois (2001) found team teaching to be an excellent opportunity to model a co-leadership relationship for students.

Problems also can arise when the institution does not support the team-taught, cross-discipline class. Team teaching interferes with research even more than the regular teaching regime because of the additional time involved. Can the professor afford to invest his or her time in this type of collaborative work? It is important to have institutional sanction and especially departmental support. The team members also should support one another; however, friendship is not a necessary component for successful team-teaching, and for some it might be an impediment (Cohen and DeLois 2001). Therefore, co-teachers must be willing to share leadership and ideas and must have respect for each other (Cohen and DeLois 2001).

Another issue for team teachers is the loss of individual autonomy (Davis 1995). The individual instructor cannot control matters, for instance, if one team member is slow to grade or return papers to the students. There is a loss of flexibility as well. What happens when one's lecture time is over and important material has not been covered? In a regular class, the lecture would pick up at the next meeting, but if someone else is teaching the next class, the instructor cannot simply catch up during the next session.

Despite some concerns, we believe that the benefits of team teaching outweigh the potential costs. Although there are useful materials to prepare faculty members for team teaching (see, for example, Davis 1995; Hinton and Downing 1998), there are gaps in the literature. A review of the work reveals benefits and pitfalls, but it lacks sufficient information for instructing potential team teachers in planning collaborative courses. In the following section, we begin to fill this gap by outlining a number of tangible suggestions that may mitigate the negative effects of team teaching.

## **Suggestions for Planning a Team Taught Course**

### *Sources of Information*

The following suggestions for planning a team-taught course were derived through several mechanisms. First, we conducted a thorough review of the literature on team teaching. Second, we informally surveyed those members of our home institution who have participated in team-taught, interdisciplinary classes. Third, we engaged in discussions with a number of people at a regional conference on teaching collaboratively—both discipline-specific and cross-discipline. Many of them had experienced more than one successful team teaching encounter. Fourth, we also drew from our own experience of putting together the interdisciplinary course on gender offered through our honors program. Our own experience, although clearly anecdotal, may be of service to other faculty in similar circumstances.

### *Talk to Others with Experience*

One of the first things that we recommend doing is talking to those who are experienced. Unfortunately, this was not initially considered a priority, and it was only after struggling to create assignments, format grading criteria, and decide how to share power in the classroom that we sought advice from colleagues. Overwhelmingly, faculty members enjoyed the team-teaching experience or at least found it rewarding. They emphasized the importance of selecting a compatible colleague. Individual differences will arise, however, and early efforts to develop complemen-

tary methods are warranted. Our colleagues reminded us of the far greater time commitment involved in team teaching compared to solo teaching. Discussions with colleagues prior to and in the process of preparing to teach collaboratively can have a positive impact on communication and effective time allocation.

### *Read the Literature*

Reading the most current literature in one's field before teaching a class is not an uncommon preparatory step. However, we advise complimenting the literature in one's own area with literature in your colleague's discipline. This can enhance your ability to assist and contribute when your colleague is lecturing or leading class discussions. It perhaps is even more important to read material in the education literature on team teaching or teaching an interdisciplinary course. A review of the literature can prompt instructors to consider or be aware of issues related to collaborative teaching.

### *Get Acquainted with Your Collaborator's Style*

A third recommendation is to have each of the team teachers become familiar with the other's teaching style prior to the commencement of the course. One way to become acquainted is to sit in on one or more of the colleague's classes. We know of no other colleague who used this approach; in our experience, however, sitting in on one another's classes provided the opportunity for us to gain first-hand knowledge about the other's style.

### *Communication*

Meeting to plan the course is an important step in the process. In the early stages, concept-oriented meetings are quite productive, and e-mail makes the regular exchange of details and materials almost effortless. Course goals and objectives must be clarified. Furthermore, colleagues should configure assignments that meet the goals and objectives of both instructors. Devising compatible grading strategies, establishing student writing requirements that meet all instructors' expectations, and discussing differences in classroom style are best dealt with overtly.

Instructors may find that prearranging the amount and types of face-time that

each contributes to class meetings is beneficial. For instance, class time could be divided into content areas where each instructor has responsibility for particular areas and materials, or instructors could take turns directing or being responsible for alternating class meetings. Various scenarios need to be considered for a comfortable fit for the instructors.

These decisions need to be made early in the class-planning period; we began our initial discussions several months before the class was scheduled to begin. New issues inevitably will emerge during the course; however, early discussion on how to troubleshoot problems, share course responsibilities, and fulfill everyone's expectations will facilitate a trouble-free collaborative teaching experience.

### *Plan Alternating/ Interjecting Strategies*

Plan alternating strategies for the classroom: one team member teaches while the other(s) observe(s). Some instructors may find that planning interjection strategies are useful (how and when to chime in). When planning our course, we determined that on certain days one of us would be the primary person and the other the interjector. The primary teacher is responsible for the main lecture content. The interjector raises issues and contributes his or her own disciplinary perspective if and when it is relevant. The team members may decide to share the primary role with each presenting their discipline's view or perspective for a particular lecture.

### *Identify Strategies to Deal with Power and Conflict*

Any collaboration will invite unique configurations of power. Conflict may develop as a result of traditional conceptions of power such as gender, race, and age, or it may occur as a function of personality differences. Our team has equal teaching experience but noticeable age differences. Students' and instructors' perceptions may be influenced by their varied life experiences; for instance, the older professor is both a parent and grandparent, and the younger professor is not. Students could relate differently to either team member, perhaps viewing the younger instructor as a peer or more up-to-date and the older instructor as more parental or authoritative.

Other teams may find power differences with racial, ethnic, and gender differences. How will power issues emerge with a team of white and minority members? Research suggests that individuals with particular accents are perceived less favorably than others (Ryan 1980). Ryan (1980) found that perceptions of power and expertise could be distorted simply by the presence of a Latino professor with a heavy accent. The most important suggestions that we offer are to maintain regular communication and a keen awareness of your team members' concerns. We have made some agreements about how to present ourselves and how to respond to our students. For example, in the classroom we debate assertively but never disagree disparagingly. The potential for conflict can be mitigated by maintaining these open lines of communication with regard to such issues.

Together, make your expectations of the students clear from the very first meeting. When you are initially perceived as a unified force, students are less likely to use the "but he said or but she said" defense. One way to present your solidarity is to put course expectations and policies in writing. Handouts with assignments, expectations for completing the assignments, and due dates can help eliminate such problems.

We advise team teachers to use much of the same logic that is used when teaching solo. Never respond immediately to pressure by students, and communicate with your collaborator before responding.

We emphasize the importance of maintaining an awareness of being part of a team. To do so, we suggest that in certain situations (such as complaints of conflicting instructions), the team member should respond only after conferring with his or her collaborator. Meeting regularly and maintaining close communication will assist in facilitating this process.

#### *Anticipate, Anticipate, Anticipate*

Team teaching is an innovation that can foster student enthusiasm and learning in single-discipline, interdisciplinary, or accelerated courses. Think through the team-taught course process from start to finish, allowing ample time to prepare. We cannot emphasize enough the need to meet regularly and talk candidly. Plan your course, identify any potential complications, and formulate your responses for anticipated problems, and you will spend more time enjoying your team-teaching experience and less time searching for solutions.

*Key words: team teaching, collaborative learning, cross-discipline*

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