

Co-Teaching for Student Engagement

Mary D. Wehunt Jennifer S. Weatherford

University of Wyoming

Abstract: *Co-teaching in a college classroom can result in rewarding experiences for both students and teachers. In analyzing the journals of two co-teachers, three themes that strengthen engagement were found: respect for each other and students; authority and communication about tasks; and affirmation involving thinking out loud and whole group discussion.*

Keywords: *Co-teaching, engagement, reflexivity*

Co-teaching can be defined and practiced in various formats. For example, in some cases, one teacher leads while the other assists; in other cases, co-teachers are involved in station teaching and use a one-to-one approach; still others employ parallel or alternate teaching. In addition, teachers may work as a *tag-team* -- taking turns presenting content while offering supportive input to the partner. However the process is conceived, co-teaching should provide a richer classroom experience for teachers and students alike.

The purpose of this qualitative *research to practice* study is to explore some of the components of a successful co-teaching experience and contribute new ideas about co-teaching to the literature. This presentation includes the personal reflections of two doctoral students teamed up as instructors of a research methods course. These reflections demonstrate that co-teaching teams should choose the stylistic (e.g., content delivery) elements that work for them as individuals, but supplement good pedagogy with open dialogue and reflexive practice both inside and outside the classroom in order to build and maintain an atmosphere conducive to student engagement.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The primary conceptual constructs for this study are collaboration and reflective practice within a dialogic setting founded in humanist values and beliefs. Crow and Smith (2006) describe co-teaching as “practiced between experienced teachers . . . usually involving teachers from different disciplines for the purpose of bringing together . . . two different bodies of knowledge and expertise” (p. 496); while praxis is the heart of the discourse about co-teaching, “reflection [is] a prerequisite for many professions” (p. 492) and subsequently co-teaching is not an exception to this condition but rather executed as ongoing and recurrent dialogue between co-teachers. Thus, adequate time for reflective conversation and brainstorming is essential for a successful co-teaching experience. Secondly, a key characteristic of effective co-teachers is the willingness to collaborate and the ability to balance roles reflecting power and expertise (Ferguson & Wilson, 2011). In their study, Ferguson and Wilson found “issues of power were experienced by both professors” (p. 61). Thus, in order to develop equal power roles in the classroom, matters of who has expertise and relevant power should be talked through amenable prior to class. Co-teachers must continually communicate and work at developing an

empathetic relationship based on mutual trust; drawing on these qualities helps co-teachers meet and overcome the inevitable miss-cues experienced in stressful times.

The following principles and practices provide the analytical framework for this study: humanism, socio-cultural theory, particularly, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) – defined by Vygotsky (1978) as the opportunity for developmental growth “in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86) – and activity theory. Humanism, as a core principle, “recognizes the uniqueness and individuality of humankind . . . examined not in isolation but by putting all the parts together” (Sachs, Fisher, & Cannon, 2011, p. 72). Effective co-teaching is grounded in the detection and appreciation of each individual’s strengths blended together as a functioning unit. Additionally, socio-cultural theory suggests that co-teachers consciously maximize the benefits of two perspectives by sharing critical reflections reciprocally. As demonstrated in this study, learning to *listen* with an open mind and then negotiating (not abdicating) points *without* conflict are key components of success. Sachs et al. (2011) found that “a synergistic collaborative and/or co-teaching experience must be built on several key factors. . . [including] affirmation and overt participation in reciprocal growth and development” (p. 80). Indeed, as teachers learn to negotiate power and expertise roles with one another, they are skill-building by testing and expanding their individual zone of proximal development (ZPD) in their relevant fields of instruction through interaction with one another (Ferguson & Wilson, 2011). Finally, successful co-teachers are engaged in activity theory when designing lesson plans together and presenting them to students. Ploessl, Rock, Schoenfeld, and Blanks (2010) suggests spending 45 minutes a week in joint planning activities, either in person or online, and adhering to a meeting agenda that includes relevant issues (e.g., relationship issues, strategic goals, curriculum action-plans, research ideas, and prior meeting follow-up) from varying discourses. In summary, the above core principles and practices are the guiding precepts of the current study methodology and analysis outlined in the following sections.

METHODS

This study of co-teaching is a qualitative phenomenological inquiry into the reflexive practice of co-teachers in a university college of education. The setting for the study was a Master’s level course in research methods, in which the content was evenly split between quantitative and qualitative methods. Jenny contributed expertise in quantitative methods and Mary provided expertise in qualitative methods; both teachers were present for most class periods, even when content covered was not the area of their respective areas of expertise. The co-teachers in this study kept detailed journals, with a minimum of three topical entries for each class session. The first entry described the purpose of the lecture and activity; the second described the immediate feedback and results; the third entry was more reflective and included ideas for future teaching. By the end of the semester, the co-teachers had accumulated many pages of reflections, and these were analyzed for themes. The co-teachers also participated in an interview after the semester ended, and their responses were recorded and transcribed.

RESULTS

Three main themes emerged from the data; respect for each other and for students; authority and shared responsibilities; and affirmation strategies, which included thinking out loud and whole group discussions. Although the word *respect* did not occur frequently in the journals, the underlying themes of numerous interactions and reflections captured *feelings* of respect. Jenny stated,

Mary allowed the students to choose an article, and I worried that they would all choose the same article. I was wrong, and I was happy to be wrong. We had a nice mix . . . Mary taught me to let go a little and allow students to do what interests them most. (J. S. Weatherford, September 4, 2013)

The respect these teachers had for each other manifested in learned behavior that was modeled for students. Each teacher realized professional growth because they both honored each other's *space* and simultaneously offered emotional support through trust. As a result each taught to their individual strengths with the full endorsement of the other. Thus, blended authority was another theme present in many of their interactions, which impacted students. Mary asserted,

Jenny felt strongly that she should be responsible for final assessment, and I was okay with that . . . however, the students were not told that Jenny would also assess the qualitative portion of the course. This worked out fine. There was no evidence that the students slacked off [during assessment] in either methodology. (M. D. Wehunt, September 4, 2013)

Affirmation was the strongest theme in the reflections, and since affirmation is strongly connected to respect and authority, when Mary decided to form mock focus groups involving controversial topics, Jenny initially expressed concern. Later, Jenny reflected,

Yup, and I worried for nothing. There were no offensive remarks or problems in the focus groups . . . during this activity, I joined two of the focus groups and really enjoyed this time with the students. Mary wandered around to make sure that the discussions were moving forward, which freed me up to participate fully. (J. S. Weatherford, September 4, 2013)

The findings indicate there is a mutually beneficial result when one co-teacher has the freedom to act as an affirming student for the other; this process simultaneously models teaching and learning behaviors for participating students as well as the co-teachers.

A less prominent theme in the data points to the ability of the co-teachers to *think out loud* in front of the class – a practice that, in turn, invited higher quality questions from students. When one teacher took the lead in a discussion and asked a question, the other teacher was able to jump in with follow-up questions as well as possible answers from the opposite research perspective. Supporting *blended* conversations (e.g., both qualitative and quantitative scenarios) added content depth in addition to expanding each teacher's identity and credibility with students. In the study classroom, teacher conversations tended to be spontaneous and free flowing – predicated by student inquiries resulting from writing tasks and/or group discussions.

IMPORTANCE TO THE FIELD

As student demographics become increasingly diverse, colleges might consider the advantages of co-teaching. Research (Ferguson & Wilson, 2011; Sachs et al., 2011) shows that both teaching and learning is enhanced in co-teaching classrooms. Other studies show that young adult student populations find instructors with expertise in a variety of domains appealing (Dugan & Letterman, 2008). While the current study offers a mere snapshot of a successful co-teaching experience, narratives like this build upon a body of knowledge for future program development. Additionally, the co-teaching classroom models collaborative behavior – a set of 21st Century workforce skills demanded by both public and private institutions.

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