Collaborative and Team Teaching Guidance

Adapted from Boston University Center for Teaching and Learning Guidelines for Collaborative and Team Teaching

Collaborative teaching takes a variety of forms on a continuum from one-off guest lecturing in colleagues' courses, to fully collaborative "team teaching," where two or more instructors work together as full partners to develop and teach a course together for the entire semester. Collaborative teaching offers many opportunities for faculty and students, but it can also create problems that can be stumbling blocks to success. This document outlines benefits and challenges of collaborative teaching, and defines a variety of frameworks for successful collaborations.

Collaborative and Team Teaching: Benefits and Challenges

Collaborative teaching benefits students and faculty in many ways when thoughtfully and skillfully done. There is little point in doing it unless the faculty who are involved have different, complementary expertise and skills. Full-blown team teaching is one of the most obvious strategies for developing truly interdisciplinary courses by incorporating expertise and skills that one person alone rarely possesses. Nevertheless, faculty considering engaging in collaborative teaching should be aware of the challenges and potential drawbacks, and address them in the design of the course.

Benefits for Students: Collaborative and fully team teaching methods enable a broadening of expertise, content, and perspectives beyond what a single instructor could normally provide. Ideally, when instructors share a classroom, their interaction should also help students:

- understand both the power and limitations of different approaches to the subject;
- witness and therefore learn to engage in respectful and constructive forms of disagreement, and develop consideration of alternative perspectives and approaches based on scholarly inquiry;
- become experienced with models of collaboration among professionals;
- achieve higher than usual levels of synthesis and integration across different areas of expertise that are usually presented in different courses;
- benefit from interaction with and mentoring from multiple faculty around a single subject.

Challenges for Students: Team teaching poses some real challenges for students, and if not thoughtfully designed, research shows it can be a less effective form of pedagogy. Most importantly, any team teaching strategy that does not actively create full integration and coherence across the sessions and instructors of a course is likely to leave the students confused, frustrated, dissatisfied, and perhaps resentful. A few of the main issues include:

- Different faculty, especially from different disciplines, subdisciplines, or approaches, tend to use somewhat different professional languages, terms, and definitions, and if

these differences are not actively described and clarified in the course, students will be confused.

- Relatively uncoordinated "variety show" approaches to team teaching (wherein each instructor is given a topic for "their" classes and is otherwise isolated) are especially ineffective as learning experiences. These approaches leave the course without a clear overarching framework or linkage, which results in students' experiencing the material as isolated lumps of information. If assessment techniques (e.g., examinations) are also handled piecemeal, the lack of coherence is reinforced. This hampers the overall learning experience and impact.
- Students learn to adjust to different faculty expectations throughout their degrees, but with a multiplicity of expectations and styles within one course, they may not know who to turn to for help. It can be more difficult for them to develop relationships with each instructor to seek effective help and mentorship. Students in team teaching situations sometimes express frustration about not knowing how to please different professors at the same time.
- When students witness disagreement and contradiction among different professors' approaches to the same subject and there is no resolution or clear strategy for resolution, students are likely to conclude that these are simply differences of opinion and don't really matter.
- Because faculty in a team teaching situation may focus more on their particular "piece" of the course than on the course as a whole, they may collectively demand much more of students in terms of background and preparation than they would in a course they taught on their own within a single discipline.
- Faculty often approach interdisciplinarity through their disciplines; students, however, will not have much background in the disciplines and may not grasp the importance of what the faculty hope to achieve.

For team teaching to be effective, participating faculty have to devote considerable effort to creating a clearly structured, coherent learning experience for their students. Faculty must create strategies for coherence, not simply leave students to create it for themselves. In general, the "variety show" approach to team teaching is not favored because of the drawbacks of this model for student learning.

Benefits for Faculty: Collaborative teaching fosters scholarly and pedagogical growth – these experiences are great learning opportunities for faculty. Collaborating faculty members' teaching philosophies and repertoire of teaching techniques are enriched by the exploration, discussion, and deliberation that go into course planning, and by the opportunity to observe each other's pedagogical work during the course. Not only can a successful experience of collaborative teaching infuse new energy and ideas into faculty's solo teaching, but it can also have ripple effects, advancing formal or informal research collaborations, contributing to the cross-pollination of enrollments, and raising the overall level of pedagogical innovation within and across academic programs. These courses often give faculty an opportunity to work with students who are different from those who generally populate their courses, and even to attract new students to their solo classes, labs, and fields.

Challenges for Faculty: In order to realize these benefits, collaborating instructors must address a number of significant challenges, all clearly exemplified by the conventional, fully collaborative "team teaching" model:

- Most faculty who have created effective team-taught courses find that the time and effort they spend in the development process is much greater than for "solo" courses. This is because all parties must stretch beyond their current knowledge, their language and conceptual frameworks, pedagogical approaches, and assumptions about learning goals. The work they devote collectively to creating the framework and working out the details is considerable. Even with careful planning, faculty are likely to continue to encounter places where their terminology and disciplinary assumptions diverge throughout the course, and for the sake of the students they must create coherence.
- It is almost inevitable that tensions and some amount of conflict arises during both the course development and teaching phases for many reasons, including the need to create coherence and make consequential choices. Faculty who are used to the autonomy of their own classrooms may find the shift to collaborative processes and a joint product more challenging than they expected. Faculty must work with these tensions and conflicts in a way that is constructive and not distracting or confusing for the students. It is certainly unacceptable to put students in a position of needing to "choose sides."
- The teamwork offers scope for great creativity, but the need for coordination and coherence can put boundaries on that creativity and spontaneity.
- Faculty may encounter challenges related to intellectual property questions: Whose work is this? What rights do the partners have to use or alter syllabi or materials for other purposes?
- Faculty team members may have to deal with issues related to divisions of labor and effort. Is everyone shouldering a fair share of the work? How should such issues be resolved constructively in order to avoid counterproductive ruptures?
- When a faculty team develops a course together, what commitments have they made implicitly or explicitly for the future? How many times and when will the same team teach the same course again? How will revisions work? What thought has the team put into the possibility that faculty may leave or join the team – and when they do, what happens to the particulars of the course?
- From the point of view of departments and colleges: What commitments have been made implicitly or explicitly about the future? What if a team member is needed for another course?
- How does participation in a team-taught course "count" as part of an individual faculty member's teaching responsibilities? How do faculty make sure they get appropriate credit for their efforts? What are the fairness and equity issues, and how can they be resolved?

Clearly, faculty should think carefully and have comprehensive conversations with their colleagues, chairs, and perhaps deans before embarking on team teaching. Listing these challenges is meant to warn faculty to go into these ventures in a clear-eyed way, but not to scare them off. Many faculty find that team taught courses are among the most exciting and satisfying teaching experiences they have.

Formats for Collaborative and Interdisciplinary Team Teaching

Lead Faculty with Supplemental Instructors

In what are sometimes referred to as "magazine-style" courses, the (always present) lead instructor of record choreographs the overall course and lines up a series of guest faculty experts for an extensive part of the course. Each guest faculty expert teaches multiple classes and/or acts as a support or resource instructor for targeted activities throughout the term.

This format should be used with caution and only when appropriate to the purpose and level of the course. It is probably most useful in graduate and undergraduate capstone courses (especially if guest experts are available to mentor student projects) and in professional development courses. This model requires careful accounting of individual teaching contributions and their relationship to the instructors' assigned responsibilities.

Connected Courses

Description: Two courses, each with its own instructor, are scheduled to meet at the same time and paired to the extent that they meet jointly with both instructors at intervals throughout the semester and share some assignments or projects.

Consider the example of two connected courses offered by the CALS Department of Agricultural Education and Communication and the College of the Arts: ART4639 Advanced Experiments in Art + Technology. In this instance, the two courses ran separately, but students from each class were combined to develop a video project that would communicate an aspect of agriculture they were each learning about in their respective courses. In addition, the faculty teaching the respective courses planned guest lectures in each other's classes on appropriate topics.

Faculty considering whether to connect two courses should have a clear sense of what the pairing is intended to achieve, and specifically what the learning goals and plans are for the *separate* work of the two courses and what the learning goals and plans are for the *joint* work of the two courses. There must also be a plan for the space needs of the courses' joint as well as separate meetings.

Another model used at some universities for connecting courses is to package a set of two or three courses in *different disciplines* that are linked by a *common theme* for offering in *different time slots in a single semester* to a *single student cohort.* In this example, the instructors of the connected courses team up to attract a common set of students, coordinate with each other to create sufficient coherence across the different courses, and provide some common integrating experiences to highlight the cross-disciplinary connections, similarities, and differences. It is

possible to create project assignments that would allow students to link what they are learning in the different courses. There is some evidence nationally that collaborative teaching of this sort improves student retention, accelerates cognitive development, and fosters civic contributions to the institution. This model may only be effective in interdisciplinary majors where cohorts of students already have similar schedules.

"Tag-team" Teaching
Only one instructor is present at a time. Each of two (or several) instructors in turn teaches their corresponding fraction of the course.

Faculty must coordinate their content to ensure that it is cohesive and not redundant, but they do not actually share the teaching or grading. While ideally this model allows students to learn each successive aspect of the course from an expert, it inevitably misses out on the benefits of give and take between instructors. Unless instructor-to-instructor transitions are carefully managed, tag-team teaching, like magazine-style approaches, can result in distracting and counter-productive problems of incoherence, varying expectations and mid-course adjustment. This model requires careful accounting of individual teaching contributions and their relationship to the instructors' assigned responsibilities.

Dispersed Team Teaching
Some number of weekly class meetings of all faculty and students in the course are combined with discussion sections led by each member of the faculty teaching team for a subset of the students. This model incorporates sustained interaction with the discussion leader and other advantages of a small class environment, but at some loss of opportunities for students to hear multiple faculty perspectives on the same topic. This tradeoff can be mitigated to the extent that faculty-to-faculty dialogue persists outside of class.

Fully Integrated Team Teaching
Two (or more) instructors, from different disciplines, are fully joint instructors of the same course, collaborating with each other and integrating their work throughout the entire course. The course is collaboratively designed, taught, and graded, and both instructors attend and participate in nearly all class meetings.

This is perhaps the most challenging form of collaborative teaching for the reasons listed earlier in this document, but it also offers the most scope for an innovative and integrative teaching and learning experience, in which faculty as well as students have an opportunity to grow and learn in ways that are less likely in the conventional "solo" course. This model may also require careful and complex accounting of individual teaching contributions and their relationship to the instructors' assigned responsibilities.