

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

Volume 14, Number 7, 2002-03

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org).

Team Teaching: The Learning Side of the Teaching - Learning Equation

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We live in the high tech information age. Increasingly, the spotlight is on knowledge construction and the ability to work with other people in teams, whether in education and human service work or in “knowledge creating companies”. More than ever, those of us who teach in higher education are expected to help learners develop their critical thinking skills. Our job is ultimately to enable students to integrate new information from a variety of disciplines so they can become ongoing constructors of new knowledge, both on an individual level and with others in a social context. It is our belief that team teaching is an overlooked “low tech” alternative for facilitating the kind of learning that develops skills in critical thinking and new knowledge construction. Our unabashed advocacy of teaming is rooted in our experience. Mary Jane has taught for several years in an interdisciplinary undergraduate program, comprising over twenty team-developed and team-taught courses. Libby has partnered frequently with colleagues and students to conduct classes and research. Together, we co-edited a sourcebook (Eisen & Tisdell, 2000) on this very subject of team teaching and learning. Thanks to our contributing authors, we were able to enliven the team teaching and learning process by presenting a number of applications from the authors’ diverse practice settings.

These applications include both conventional college classrooms and a cyber classroom, a corporate action learning program, a community-based social action initiative, a volunteer-based literacy program, a national diversity training project, and our own writing collaboration. In all these instances, we saw the versatility of teaming as a vehicle for interdisciplinary education, the incorporation of multiple perspectives of diverse populations, and collaborative learning. At the same time, teaming is a teaching and learning alternative, not a panacea.

Common to diverse team teaching-learning situations is the centrality of: (1) negotiating relationships; (2) providing a relevant and integrated curriculum and pedagogy; and (3) focusing on the participants' ongoing construction of knowledge. In the remainder of this essay, we expand on these three ideas and the way they cement the teaching-learning connection which we believe is at the heart of team teaching.

Negotiating Relationships

As Davis (1995) notes, all team teaching efforts “include two or more faculty in some level of collaboration in the planning and delivery of a course” (p.8). Implicit in this statement is the collaborators' need to attend to their relationship with each other. What must be made explicit, however, is the need to attend to the relationship with students. Teammates have to share power and responsibility for the course, not only among themselves, but with the learners so that they can take some responsibility for their own learning. McDaniel and Colarulli (1997) elaborate four dimensions of relationship and power issues in teaming and suggest that, when faculty agree to team teach, they consider the degrees to which they will collaborate in the following areas: curricular integration; faculty-student interaction, student engagement, and faculty autonomy.

Further, there are many models of team teaching, and different teams operate in different ways. For instance, Watkins and Caffarella (1999) identify four types of teams based on variations in working style: parallel teaching, serial teaching, co-teaching, and co-facilitation. In all four perspectives, there is a subtle focus on teacher control that blurs the essential relationship between teaching and learning. We advocate sharing power with students and including

them in some of the decision-making about their own learning. We believe this facilitates critical thinking and students' ability to see themselves as constructors of knowledge. As Goodsell, Maher, Tinto, Smith and MacGregor (1992) note: "Collaborative learning reforms classroom learning by changing students from passive recipients of information given by an expert teacher to active agents in the construction of knowledge" (p. 4).

Integrated Curriculum and Pedagogy Because team teaching emphasizes negotiating relationships and sharing power both among the teachers and with students, it facilitates the reform of classroom learning that Goodsell et al. speak about. At the same time, teaming supports integrated curriculum design, collaborative learning, and a collaborative pedagogy. In regard to the curriculum, multiple viewpoints and often different disciplinary perspectives presented by teaching partners broaden students' understanding of knowledge. In addition the teaching team itself, especially multicultural and multidisciplinary teams, can serve as a role model for ways of constructing knowledge that are likely to be more inclusive. On the curricular level, teams can be more inclusive of varied perspectives (e.g., disciplinary, cultural, social/political), which in turn enhances critical thinking. On a pedagogical level, the use of different methods such as active learning, team projects, creative expression, on-line activities, and independent study promotes greater inclusion at the same time that it addresses learners' diverse learning styles and needs. In short, the team's interaction with students and with each other can give students some real-life experience in creating new knowledge together from multiple perspectives. A collaborative pedagogy also acknowledges that teachers can be learners and learners can be teachers. Thus two or more professors working together may derive incidental or planned professional development benefits by learning from each other about their respective fields and their pedagogical techniques. They may also support each other in teaching experiments and in conducting classroom research with students about their own learning in a collaborative way (Cross & Steadman, 1991). Additionally, there is potentially great satisfaction in learning from one's students, and a collaborative pedagogy, by design, will result in such learning. It is important to put students in official knowledge-creating roles in the classroom so they have a sense of how to create knowledge

individually and collaboratively. For instance, students may participate in individual and/or team projects where they report their findings from their own primary and secondary research on a topic of their choice. Melissa, a graduating senior, recently captured the value of her teaching role in one of Mary Jane's classes this way: This was one of the few projects that I got to work on here at the university where I...had control of what I wanted to learn...the professor wasn't feeding us information to just spit...back at her...We were able to present our thoughts in our own way...I feel that the best way...to learn is to challenge our minds and give us the opportunity...to work on topics we like and present them back to our peers. (Lai, 2000)

The Ongoing Construction of New Knowledge

As mentioned, a key feature of teaming is the ongoing construction of knowledge by teachers and by students. Too often students see formal researchers as constructors of knowledge, and teaching faculty as disseminators of knowledge. But team teaching and a collaborative pedagogy enhance the possibility that students will see themselves and their peers as constructors of new knowledge. Robinson and Schaible (1995) remind us that the success of collaborative pedagogy depends on how effectively team members practice it. In their words, "[i]f we preach collaboration but practice in isolation...students get a confused message. Through learning to 'walk the talk,' we can reap the double advantage of improving our teaching as well as students' learning" (p. 59) in the task of jointly creating new knowledge. Team teaching is one mode for developing more critically reflective learners who engage in the ongoing construction of knowledge in a knowledge-creating society.

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