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Considerations for Co-Teaching

by Jared Featherstone

As I begin my 15th year at JMU, I have been reflecting on the trajectory of my work here. Two words that might characterize my academic life over that timespan are interdisciplinarity and collaboration. Given my background in writing and writing centers, my field is inherently interdisciplinary. In my former role as [University Writing Center](#) Director, I was perpetually in conversation with faculty from a wide range of fields and working with students from a wide range of majors. Given my interdisciplinary interests, I very quickly found myself teaching new courses with faculty from other disciplines. My new role as a faculty member in Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies has me teaching with others as a regular part of my load, so my experiences have positioned me to say something about co-teaching (sometimes called “team-teaching”). Because co-teaching can take a variety of forms and contexts, I thought I would offer some general considerations that could apply to most co-teaching situations.

Purpose

This may seem obvious, but I think it makes sense to actually talk about the purpose and [benefits of co-teaching](#) the proposed course. What would a co-taught version of this course offer students that would not be possible in a course with one professor? How are your backgrounds and experiences complementary? What is the pedagogical aim of teaching (and these two disciplines, if different) together? Are there potential scholarly or professional development benefits for the co-instructors? Will the co-teachers gain useful expertise by working with someone with complementary experience? By considering such foundational questions, you can avoid jumping right into the logistics without a compass. If you both have a sense of what you are up to, philosophically and pedagogically, then you’ll have a reference point for later considerations like assignments, classroom dynamics, grading, and distribution of course content.

Disciplinary and Departmental Differences

These differences may be more or less of a hurdle, depending on how far apart your disciplines are. If you are both in the humanities or both in STEM fields, that might reduce some of the learning curve. But the question is this: What is normal teaching in your discipline/department? If you’ve never co-taught or observed others teaching, you may think that what you do is normal and perhaps universal. It’s been my experience that classrooms and courses can be handled quite differently across campus. For example, some disciplines have all but done away with the lecture as a means of delivering course content. Others continue to feature it. Some fields prefer to evaluate more

holistically over time in the form of multi-stage projects. Others evaluate more precisely in the forms of quizzes and exams. Some fields make full use of learning technologies and others use almost none.

There are a few ways I have learned to get a sense of these differences before the first class. In the weeks or months before a co-teaching semester, you might exchange past syllabi, give them a close read, and then meet to talk through what you observe. A good follow-up to this is to schedule time to observe each other teaching a typical (not co-taught) class session, then schedule a follow up meeting to discuss your observations. Even though co-teaching will be quite different, getting to know each other in the “home” classroom is valuable and can prevent misunderstanding. You might know a colleague for many years and, upon observing them in the classroom, realize you don’t know them at all as a teacher. The conversations following syllabus exchange and classroom observations can bring about fruitful discussions about how to work with each other rather than against each other.

If you are planning to co-teach with someone and one or both of you has had co-teaching experience, that is a great opportunity to discuss what went well and what didn’t, which can yield food for thought as you plan your coming semester.

Personal Differences

The syllabus exchange, classroom observations, and correspondences with unit heads may, in addition to disciplinary or department differences, bring light to personal differences. We are all complex creatures. We have aspects of teaching in which we excel and others in which we do not. You or your co-instructor may be excellent at efficient classroom management, but mediocre at providing feedback to students, for example. One of you may thrive on control, yielding meticulously planned syllabi and class meetings, and the other might be thrilled by uncertainty, yielding flexible syllabi and open-ended, tangential classroom discussions. It’s important to note that some of these personal differences may result from more systemic issues and inequalities related to gender, race, and rank. You might be very aware of your personal preferences or you might become newly aware of them amidst co-teaching. In this way, the collaboration could lead to professional growth for each of you.

Another personal difference that is worth discussing is one’s attitude toward students. Some faculty perceive students as manipulators, attempting to game the system by cheating, doing the minimum, or feigning enthusiasm. Others perceive students more sympathetically as developing humans attempting to learn in an age of unprecedented digital distraction, social complexity, climate change, an ongoing [global pandemic](#), and more. Are you a gatekeeper taking the tough love (or even no love) approach or more of a guide invested in their wellbeing and success? These are perhaps extremes at the ends of a spectrum, but you get the point.

Related to the attitude toward students is one's way of being with students. Do you talk about your [personal and professional experiences in the classroom](#)? Do you encourage students to share? Some faculty prefer to stay very safely on the other side of the dividing wall between students and faculty, and others seek to bridge that divide. In your classrooms, do students call you "Doctor"? "Professor"? Or do they address you by your first name? I have seen a range of differences at JMU and other institutions. Do you attempt to get to know students beyond their test scores or assignment submissions? Is [classroom community](#) valuable to you? If so, how do you establish it?

Classroom Logistics

If you've taken the time to visit each other's classes in advance of co-teaching, then this topic may have come up naturally. In any case, you'll want to have a discussion about what classroom roles and arrangement would work best. As with any of the choices made in co-teaching, you want the decision to benefit students as well as the teaching faculty. You'll want to have some idea of who is leading when and how you will proceed through a given class meeting. There are some [typical models of co-teaching](#), which vary according to the type of class and the needs of the student. In my experience, when both instructors have complementary expertise, it makes the most sense to share the lead role. For this, you'll need to work out a schedule of who's doing what in any given class meeting. This may end up taking the form of a dialogue in which the first instructor speaks or runs an activity and then the other(s) are given the opportunity to contribute. This can be so effective because, while one instructor is talking or leading, the other can be taking notes or considering additional examples, contexts, connections. At an appropriate time, the second instructor can add to the conversation or activity, enriching the experience for students.

Grading and Evaluation

After reviewing each other's syllabi and visiting classrooms, you might already have a sense of where your grading approaches overlap and where they differ. These differences could be of a technical nature, such as to what degree and how do you use Canvas or other learning technologies in evaluation. For example, some faculty may use the full range of functions on Canvas, including audio and video comments, and others may provide hand-written comments on papers or exams. Some may combine methods.

Other differences might involve the level of precision (letter grades vs. points/percentages) and the weighting of grades (exams vs. essays). These differences might relate back to differences in attitude toward students. Some instructors might allow revisions and second takes on exams, and others may not. Some might have lenient policies on late work and others strict. These differences might be reflective of academic disciplines or personal preferences. In any case, these are conversations to be had in advance. In an ideal situation, the differences can be instructive, allowing each of you to understand approaches different than their own and perhaps expand their teaching repertoire.

Lastly, co-teaching instructors will have to figure out how to distribute the grading load during the semester. This might also seem simple, but a solution like cutting the class in half will not give all students the benefit of feedback from two or more instructors. A solution like splitting up each assignment continuity and fairness within each assignment, but it does not allow for faculty to evaluate growth across assignments.

Communication

One final area to discuss and plan for is communication during the semester. On a practical level, this might just mean establishing norms and expectations for when and how to reach each other, how much notice one might need for a change of plans, and how you plan to communicate with your students. More importantly, you might consider how effective communication between you and your co-instructors can enhance the potential of the collaboration for you and your students.

Though it may seem like adding one more meeting to your schedule, I have found that setting regularly scheduled planning meetings actually saves time and confusion overall. In addition to making sure co-instructors are on the same page with regard to classroom dynamics, responsibilities, and grading, the meetings can also keep you in a metacognitive space. By thinking aloud about what you are doing and what's happening in the classroom, you can maximize the scholarly and professional potential of the collaboration. You might be inspired about future scholarly collaborations, directions for your solo teaching, or pursuing new perspectives on the subject matter.

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