
Categories: Pedagogy, Team Teaching, Collaborative Learning

Summary

Plank’s article serves as an introductory overview to the pedagogical approach known as team teaching. In the article she discusses the purposes of team based teaching, its challenges, and the basic structures of the technique. The article also offers some of the lessons learned by the author in running a team taught course.

According to Plank, team teaching provides numerous benefits to both the teacher and the student despite its seeming lack of efficiency. For teachers, team teaching reduces the isolation that comes from working within intellectual silos, offers an opportunity to learn new classroom methods and techniques, and forces them to challenge their conventional approaches to both instruction and their content. Students benefit from team teaching as well because it helps them to see previously unconsidered connections between fields of study and ways of thinking. In doing so, it also serves an exemplary means of instilling stronger critical and creative thinking skills in students. These benefits come with considerable challenges, however. In particular, Plank stresses that team teaching can be demanding and “even exhausting” for the instructors. As such, she warns, use of team teaching requires intensive planning.

Having discussed in brief the benefits and challenges of team teaching, Plank lays out a basic definition of the approach. The term, says Plank, can be used to describe “several related structures” in which at least two instructors work together with a shared group of students. In some cases, team teaching can mean that all team members work together on every aspect of the course and jointly teach every class session. Another form of the approach involves team members working together to design the course but then dividing up the various responsibilities and activities of the class. The ability to divide up the responsibilities engendered by team taught courses is further facilitated by continuing improvements in technology, thus allowing, should team members choose to adopt such a structure, team teaching courses that do not necessitate the presence of all instructors in every class session. Finally, Plank notes that the concept of team teaching has largely been applied to two main intellectual/educational purposes: as a means of creating cross-discipline courses that address the same or complimentary issues; and, courses from a solitary field of study that would benefit from the inclusion of multiple intellectual perspectives.

The remainder of Plank’s paper lays out the lessons learned by those who have engaged in team teaching. The first, and perhaps most crucial, lesson mentioned by Plank is that team teaching requires that instructors invest a great deal of time and energy into both the planning and execution of such a course. Further, Plank recommends that instructors who decide to team teach need to understand what their rationales for doing so are, and that they then need to explicitly share these reasons with their students, both on the first day of class and repeatedly through the semester. The third lesson proffered
in the article emphasizes the need to “plan together early...and often.” This planning should address a host of structural and conceptual considerations including class schedules, assignments, readings, and course policies. While much of this planning must be done well in advanced of the beginning of the course, Plank also highlights the need to create a regular schedule of team member meetings to discuss progress, any problems that might emerge, and how to proceed or adapt.

Plank’s paper also offers several suggestions in regards to developing and maintaining a positive relationship among team members. While it might seem obvious, Plank stresses the importance of team members getting to know each other both in terms of both teaching style and personality. Doing so is crucial to the mitigation of conflict between team members. It also will help team members interact with their students and reduce potential problems stemming from students’ likely preferences of one or another instructor. Building personal and professional familiarity will also help improve team teaching by allowing for the creation of defined roles within the classroom. While personal and intellectual differences between team members constitute one of the central purposes of team teaching, in that it exposes students to varied perspectives, these differences must be utilized with a purpose. For example, while intellectual diversity and even disagreement form one of the central benefits of team teaching, they can leave students confused and frustrated if they are not presented in a constructive and complimentary manner. By developing a clear sense of each other and a positive relationship, team members can ensure that students are benefitting from the aforementioned differences.

Finally, Plank discusses the need for team members to develop a unified position on several aspects of the course. In particular, they must work to ensure that while their relationships with students may vary, students understand that the instructors are coequal in authority and decision making. Similarly, team members must create consistent, unified stances on assignments and grading. Such unity can be furthered through a variety of approaches to grading (e.g., have all members read all turned in assignments, but alternate responsibility for giving feedback) and holding joint office hours.

Conclusions

Despite the plethora of challenges created by team teaching, Plank asserts that the method is highly rewarding for both the students and the instructors. Indeed, Plank argues that the benefits of team teaching may be even greater for the instructors, as the method offers an opportunity to learn a great deal about content, teaching style, and themselves. The experience of team teaching often results, notes Plank, in greater experimentation in teaching style and methodology, and a renewed enthusiasm or openness to the field of study itself.

Applications

Plank’s paper offers two useful elements for practical application for anyone interested in team teaching. First, though it does so in somewhat limited fashion, the article offers some examples of how to structure a team taught course. Second, the article presents a number of common sense, yet crucial concerns that team teachers should think about before endeavoring to team teach. In particular, the
points that Plank raises in regard to the development of relationships between team members seem especially poignant. The article also offers some useful insight into the type of classes that are well suited for team teaching. Oddly though, the article does not recognize the potential utility of using team teaching to strengthen a primary concern at many universities, including U.D.C.: writing across the curriculum. Indeed, one application of team teaching that immediately occurred to me was using it to bridge English and Humanities courses. What remain unattended to by Plank’s article are some straightforward guidelines or exemplars for the actual construction of a team taught course.

**Citations of Interest**


Liao, M. K, & Worth, S. (2011). Lessons learned by a philosopher and a biologist in team teaching a first-year seminar on “Disease and culture: Why you are a walking petri dish.” In K. M. Plank (Ed.), *Team teaching: Across the disciplines, across the academy* (pp. 37–54). Sterling, VA: Stylus.