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## **Hassles and Hopes in College Team Teaching**

Jack A. Coffland, Charles Hannemann and Rosemary Lee

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Jack A.  
Coffland,  
Charles  
Hannemann,  
University  
of Miami

Rosemary  
Lee Potter  
Florida  
International  
University

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# Hassles and Hopes in College Team Teaching

Although many beginning elementary teachers find themselves members of teaching teams, rarely do these beginners have any firsthand exposure to teaming in their undergraduate preparation. Teachers in colleges of education who have had team experience are even more rare. This article reports a unique team-teaching adventure at the University of Miami. It describes a novel learning experience both for the 40 junior education majors who were the students and for the college team which taught them. It lists the hassles and hopes experienced by the participants as the semester proceeded.

## The Rationale

In addition to the desire for experience with team teaching, the collegiate teaching team was initiated in response to particular teacher education problems. It was thought that team teaching might be one way to explore solutions to persistent concerns such as those summarized below:

1. Teacher education programs are often criticized for their overlapping, redundant nature. For example, when one team member surveyed the educational objectives outlined for the elementary education degree (compiled for a 1971 NCATE evaluation), he found that students were presented with material from the field of educational psychology in nine courses. Similar repetition occurred on such items as writing behavioral objectives, lesson planning, and evaluating student progress. Team teaching the five methods courses was one way to reduce this overlap.

2. The repetition described obscures gaps in those same courses. Time needs to be delegated more efficiently to add essential, new priorities to the curriculum, such as teaching disadvantaged children in urban schools.

3. Education professors are criticized for dealing with education theory and avoiding classroom

reality. Demands are made for relevance. Educators are urged by impatient and interested students to demonstrate (for open evaluation) those teaching methods usually verbalized by teacher and text.

4. Many students feel that teacher education programs at large institutions have become impersonal and that too many decisions about students are based solely on grade point averages. They say that college educators forget that personal interaction between teacher and student enhances the educational process.

5. Finally, in this era of "teacher surplus," it is imperative that teacher education programs develop excellence in the listed skills that prospective teachers need in current competition for scarce positions. Such programs must now afford precise descriptions and realistic evaluation of preservice candidates. Poorly prepared teachers will no longer be hired as teacher demand declines.

## The Original Plan

The original parameters of the junior year in elementary education programs at the University of Miami (and the limitations within which the novel team-teaching program was conducted) include three basic ideas. First, students are grouped in "blocks" for five methods courses prior to their internship semester. Courses in methods for teaching language arts, reading, mathematics, social studies and science are taught during this block. Secondly, the semester includes a five-week teaching experience in the public schools during which students are expected to perform some of the duties of the teacher. While the experience in the school is supervised by both school and college faculty, its accompanying evaluation does not affect the academic grades of the student participating. Therefore, the first official teaching experience is seen as a nonthreatening learning situation. Finally, instructors of the five methods courses visit the students at least twice during the five weeks of school experience, acting as consultants and confidants as well as supervisors.

As a response to the common criticisms mentioned earlier and within the regular framework described, the "junior block" program was radically modified for one section of students. For the first time the five methods courses were taught by

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*Jack A. Coffland and Charles Hannemann are assistant professors of education at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida. Rosemary Lee Potter is employed as a reading teacher by the Dade County (Florida) School District and is an adjunct professor of education at Florida International University in Miami.*

a single team of instructors attempting to utilize theoretical aspects of team teaching. This team consisted of four assistant professors and one doctoral candidate, consolidating their teaching skills in a major effort to eradicate the identified sources of criticism common to teacher education programs.

What follows is a synthesis of the observations, experiences, and attitudes which were reported by both the student participants and their team teachers as the semester progressed. Team development, rather than being a finished, final product, continues as an ongoing process.

### Team Evolution

The life of this teaching team can be divided into several well-defined stages, each stage contributing successes and failures to total program development. In retrospect, the initial month of the semester must be labeled an organizational period, a time in which team members analyzed objectives for the team and for students. Various attempts were made to reduce (through both consolidation and elimination) repetitive aspects of the curriculum. Gaps in objectives and experiences were noted and efforts made to fill them. Team members (of necessity) spent much time becoming acquainted with the finer points of each member's educational philosophy and its implementation. Several overt and conflicting beliefs became apparent although there was general agreement on the need for improvement in teacher education. Fortunately, this latter common goal and the strong points inherent in team teaching were also recognized during this busy period.

Each instructor had certain strengths which could be incorporated in the team's overall effort. As a result, unusual, special experiences impossible for any individual teacher to arrange in one semester were constructed for the students. One member was proficient at developing surveys and evaluative measures. Another was adept at refining these instruments and editing his teammates' writings. Still another member, who was particularly successful in communicating with students, served as liaison between students and teachers. One teammate capably demonstrated various teaching strategies. Another was expert in methods of individualizing instruction. One instructor became the self-appointed historian for the group, facilitating the team effort by maintaining goal-oriented team behavior throughout the semester.

### Team Power

The team discovered that team teaching required an immediate change in some traditional concepts about the organization of college classes for instruction. Five overlapping topics in the

courses were immediately identified: (a) lesson planning with behavioral objectives; (b) classroom management, control and discipline techniques; (c) teaching strategies, providing for special emphasis on the "inquiry experience;" (d) language experience activities for use in all subject areas; and (e) strategies for evaluating instruction and learning. Because overlapping subject areas were identified, team members redistributed their teaching responsibilities in order to eliminate redundancy. Individual class periods were relinquished in favor of team-planned instructional periods assigned to one of the five special topics. Thus, while retaining the concept and identity of separate courses, one class session could serve as the major presentation of a concept taught repeatedly in the typical series of methods courses.

An example of both teaching and the refinement discussed above is a special session on classroom management in which one team member (with all teammates present) designed and conducted a class-participation experience on management techniques. Team members then served as discussion group leaders during the following small group seminars. Another illustration of the benefits of team instruction occurred when two instructors combined their back-to-back class sessions in order to acquire a three-hour block of time. Writing behavioral objectives, planning lessons, and selecting teaching strategies were introduced during this time; other team members assisted by supervising learning stations. On still another occasion, two team members demonstrated the use of an artifact kit one had developed as a vehicle for experiencing the inquiry process.

The obvious strength of such teaming was that each instructor knew what special presentations had been made, what material had been included, and how students had responded to the experience. It was then a simple matter to review the concept quickly in subsequent classes with respect to the individual course discipline. Not only was needless duplication of objectives avoided because groups of instructors worked together, but also interesting, elaborate and active experiences were made available as viable alternatives.

### The Affective Function

Despite the apparent emphasis the team placed on developing team methods and procedures of instruction, team efforts did not center solely on subject matter instruction. A major effort was made to personalize instruction. Team members immediately learned not only the names of students in the special section, but also personal information such as the hobbies, concerns and aspirations of each. To accomplish this affect-oriented goal, all team members were present during the first meet-

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ing of the first class. They introduced themselves and the team concept as they circulated among small groups of students and spoke with each student. While students filled out a personal profile sheet, team members took their pictures. By the end of the second week of classes each team member had duplicates of pictures and information sheets, thus acquiring early access to knowledge about all students in the special section.

Even more important, the fact that this section was “trying to be different” was discussed in each of the classes. Student responses were freely solicited, eagerly acquired, and closely examined. At their request, students were free to sit in on team planning sessions. While there were no guarantees about acceptance of student suggestions, each student comment received consideration and in several cases contributed feedback and planning ideas that benefited everyone.

Finally, teachers made an effort to have individual or group contacts with students outside the classroom. Small groups accompanied teachers to breakfast or lunch. Students visited homes of instructors for rap sessions. They attended a picnic at a state park after a class session at the school district’s seashore ecological center. Home and office phone numbers were made available for evening communication between students and teachers. Many students took advantage of this phone opportunity to discuss their experiences, but none took unfair advantage. Students found their teachers accessible and personal, conversant with happenings in all the class meetings. As a result, students told the team they felt that someone really cared about their education.

These personal contacts had another valuable effect. In evaluating student performance, each team member was capable of contributing to a corporate assessment of each student during his or her initial teaching experience. The depth and scope of these evaluations were more extensive than usual reports for junior block students.

### Hassles

It is not intended that the team experience described be seen as a totally pleasant and rewarding experience. The following points summarize some of the major problems which confronted this particular college team:

1. An unresolved problem was the team’s inability to agree on a composite criterion-profile of expectations for student change during the semester. Agreement was never reached on detailed, specific behavioral outcomes desired of students.
2. The amount of time available for team planning and instruction also inhibited the team’s

work. As an example, the team set aside weekly periods for planning but found that only during one hour of the week were all five individuals free from other duties at the same time. These other duties distracted team members from the absorbing task of making the team function as planned.

3. Basic differences in philosophy among team members were never completely reconciled. The team probably needed more experience in cooperative action to learn how to incorporate varying philosophies into the experiences planned and expectations listed for students.

4. The need for observation of students in the classroom during the five-week school experience was never solved satisfactorily. All instructors had expressed a desire to visit all students. Despite the fact that students were grouped in clusters (five schools), time still ruled against an observation load of this magnitude.

### Hopes

While problems did occur, it is just as easy to note the basic and promising strengths of the college team approach and its possibilities for improving the educational preparation of teachers. Some advantages noted by team members included:

1. Personal knowledge of each student acquired by team members
2. Student access to team advising and communication
3. Opportunity to stimulate college teaching through daily association with peers
4. Refinement of course plans and outlines to exclude repetition of objectives
5. Fusing of coursework, such as giving interdisciplinary assignments, where expanded assignments were used to satisfy two or more courses
6. Flexibility of scheduling given by placing periods from each individual class into a time block for use by the team for general sessions
7. Use of students as resources in the team’s decision-making process by having students attend team meetings and make suggestions, thus giving them the chance to enhance their own program and to benefit from observations of team planning
8. Most important, the sharing of a predictive assessment of the teaching potential of each student helped the team teachers decide which students should be admitted to internship. This use of the initial teaching experience to assist in improving the second, more formal internship period is a strength of this team teaching venture which cannot be overstated.

### Conclusions

Since the team teaching project had not been designed as an experiment, a planned and pre-

and post-test research design was never used. Members of the group did, however, attempt some analysis to see if major effective objectives had been accomplished. A general survey was made of all junior block students' reactions to their program; results indicate some marked differences between the traditionally taught courses and the team teaching section.

The most important differences noted included several of those goals which the team teaching experiment had stressed. According to the survey, team-taught students felt that their instructors were more concerned with students' professional growth; supervised and assisted them more often during the school experience; planned more correlations between school, classwork, and assignments; and repeated fewer ideas. Responses on these items were lower from students in sections which were not team-taught. Also, due to the team's efforts to acquaint schools with the team teaching program, team-taught students said they received more assistance from school faculty members other than the supervising teacher.

It should be noted that team-taught students did not find the five-course block academically different. This was no surprise to the team, as the initial thrust of the program was not directed at methodological change. Rather, it was to adapt currently required material towards realistic classroom application.

Since the team has attempted to present here a subjective report of a first attempt at college team teaching, it wishes to complete this comment with a synthesis of the changes some team members observed in their own behavior. Probably some of the most important changes took place among the five college teachers on the team. The chance to discuss with peers the daily problems of college instruction is invaluable, as is sharing concerns about individual students with interested peers. To observe and learn from one's own friends and colleagues in a nonthreatening and stimulating atmosphere, to know that four other persons are working on the same problem, and to plan solutions together are exciting and rare experiences for a college teacher. None of the team members concluded the semester without a greater appreciation of the difficulties inherent in successful team teaching.

Whether this first adventure in college team teaching could be called a success varies with the associated topic discussed, but all team members are currently challenged to try again—with experience as a guide. Also, at least a third of our next graduating class of prospective teachers have been exposed to some of the hassles and hopes experienced in college team teaching. Those students who are to be team members themselves during their internship will not go to their new work unprepared.

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