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Authors:

Robinson, Betty
Schaible, Robert M.

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COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

Much recent writing has focused on how we can promote collaborative learning by means of various class exercises and assignments (e.g., small-group work, student-led discussion, jointly authored papers, or joint test-taking) and on how these efforts benefit students (Cooper and Mueck 1990; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1991; Goodsell, Maher, and Tinto 1992; Bruffee 1993; Haring-Smith 1993; Kadel and Keehner 1993). In a recent article, we shifted the focus to teachers, arguing that collaborating teachers can serve as models for teaching students useful skills and attitudes (Schaible and Robinson 1995).

However, in this article we are concerned with preventing problems and with noting rewards for us as teachers. First, we offer a list of practical suggestions on how to

prepare for and carry out collaborative teaching successfully. We use "collaborative teaching" to describe any academic experience in which two teachers work together in designing and teaching a course that itself uses group learning techniques. Then we discuss the benefits for teachers willing to develop the team-taught course and to commit themselves to collaborative, student-centered pedagogy.

Guidelines for Modeling Well

During the past half-dozen years, we have collaboratively taught, together or with others, twelve separate interdisciplinary courses. The following suggestions, based on both our negative and positive experiences, are offered as ways to meet the challenges of collaborative teaching.

Unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise, restrict the teaching team to two. Good collaborative teaching is too complex to do it well with more.

Agree from the start that your first time teaching together is a trial run. There should be no hard feelings if the chemistry isn't right.

Look for a co-teacher with a healthy psyche. Choose a person who doesn't appear to have a strong need for power or control, who is comfortable with him- or herself, and who is not easily offended or put on the defensive.

In selecting the course content, be sure to choose materials that "speak to one another" versus just choosing materials from different areas on the same topic. This calls for attentive reading of all materials supplied by your prospective partner and flexibility as you offer and reconsider your own readings in return. Because no amount of effective classroom process will fully redeem a course burdened with ineffective readings, begin your exploratory reading early. Search for provocative combinations and arrange their sequence carefully for maximum effect. During the course, monitor the readings for their usefulness and be prepared to change them if you repeat the course.

Early on, discuss your teaching philosophy and methods. Present your honest--not your ideal--self. Don't be too agreeable when you first begin to talk. Don't round off your ideas with vague generalities or platitudes and then assume you agree with each other. Ask pointed questions. Find out, for example, what kinds of collaborative learning exercises each is willing to undertake (e.g., large- and small-group discussions, group exams, peer review of papers, out-of-class study groups). How much structure and closure does each of you need to feel satisfied with a class session? What kinds of testing and assessment does each think appropriate for the course?

Review your criteria for grading. If you will be dividing up the papers, agree in advance to check for consistency by cross-checking your grading levels after grading the first set (minimally). Another good policy is to make two copies of one to three early papers; grade and mark them separately, and then compare. Discussing and resolving differences at this stage will prevent problems later on.

Agree in advance about how you will handle differences in interpretation or evaluation of class readings. It is important to work this out so that you both have a high level of comfort with stating divergent points of view. (Prospects for success are much greater if you've hooked up with the "healthy psyches" mentioned in the third item above.) Most of these differences will likely be raised and hammered out ahead of class. However, if you are comfortable with processing some of them in class, students can see how differences can be discussed and perhaps resolved in a new synthesis.

Be aware, though, that any negative differences between you that students witness will probably be magnified in their eyes. (Research on student learning as well as our own experience supports this point. See Bandura 1977 and Bower 1981.) Use caution. This can be difficult even when you are friends and know each other well. Hence, it is advisable to have advance agreement on, and even practice at, disagreeing amicably. To do so successfully, of course, involves trust. Just as trust develops slowly between students and teachers, it must be actively cultivated in the relationship between co-teachers. Developing trust and airing disagreements in front of students involve risks, but the payoff is invaluable in terms of helping students, as well as yourselves, learn how to handle differences. (See Schaible and Robinson 1995 for results of classroom-based research on this point.)

Determine before each specific class how much of the reading material you will save for in-class "live" processing. In our own team-teaching, we sometimes just agree on a few key points to cover in class discussion and then refrain from sharing our reactions to the reading so that our responses in class can be fresh and more genuine.

Work hard to develop the skill of "reading" each other during class. Be prepared to offer one another (and to receive) prearranged signals, as well as help. Such signals can be especially useful for cautioning a colleague who begins to dominate a discussion, eclipsing chances for students to speak. Knowing how to read one another helps teachers address developing problems and manage lively, focused discussions. Sensitivity, alertness, mental agility, and tact are absolutely necessary for collaborating teachers committed to putting students at the center of the classroom. These qualities are themselves the more subtle aspects of precisely what it is that we wish to model for our students about collaboration.

Be prepared for students' perplexity or discontent about having two teachers and trying out new learning techniques. Generally, our students (according to anonymous surveys of three different courses with three different pairs of teachers) have been very positive about the teaming environment and their experiences (Schaible and Robinson 1995). Still, problems do arise. Some students find it confusing to have two teachers; they feel uncertain about what is expected on assignments. Before giving an assignment, be as clear as possible about your expectations, and check carefully for students' understanding of them. Minimizing discrepancies between paper-grading standards will also help to avoid confusion about assignments. Other students, who seek clear "right/wrong" answers or simply like the comfort of the well-organized

lecture, find it difficult to follow a free-flowing discussion. It helps if either students or faculty take time at the end of class to summarize the ground that has been covered.

Because unconventional pedagogies do create frustrations for some students, provide the class a rationale for team-teaching and for collaborative techniques. Be prepared to handle complaints without getting defensive. In preparing for the course, discuss such matters and give one another examples of your styles of handling student grumbling "in flight." If these rehearsals elicit a defensive or disparaging response from your prospective colleague, beware. This is perhaps the time to review the larger aims of collaborative education and to remind yourselves that such benefits as enhanced self-esteem and sense of community are undermined when students feel attacked or belittled. Our own experience suggests that if our methods have been explained at the start, complaints will be few and can be received with equanimity because other students will help you defend the format.

At all times, be willing to consider com-promising with your colleague. After all, cooperative ventures of any sort are undermined by rigidity. But to achieve the most effective compromise, you must, as in any healthy relationship, first really listen to one another (rather than thinking about what you're going to say next while your co-teacher is expressing her or his views). This is particularly difficult when you are both excited about the course, yet have differences. Be aware that inattentive listening and reluctance to modify one's position can be weak spots in an otherwise potentially excellent team.

Benefits for Teachers

Research on collaborative learning indicates that its benefits for students include higher achievement, greater retention, improved interpersonal skills, and an increase in regard for positive interdependence. (See Johnson et al. 1991, ASHE-ERIC Higher Educational Report, for a summary of this research.) We find that collaborative teaching benefits us as well.

First, we must reexamine our approach to selecting course material. Looking for works that "speak to" materials in another discipline will send us in search of new reading within our own field. And, in interdisciplinary courses, reading in a different discipline opens our mind to a fresh look at the privileged perspective accorded our own discipline. Developing a course with our co-teacher, therefore, increases the likelihood of improved course content and contributes to our own creative intellectual development.

We have found that the collaborative arrangement spurs each partner to locate, share, and experiment with fresh ideas for structuring class sessions, creating more effective writing assignments, and improving our skills at critiquing student papers.

In addition, collaborative teaching encourages us to check our ingrained tendency to slip back into the banking mode of teaching with the student as passive receptacle.

There are many pressures in the academy to play out our role as experts--as conference presenters, published authors, commentators in the media. And the overwhelming dominance of the lecture among possible pedagogical styles (Boyer 1987) testifies to our frequent failure to resist those pressures in the classroom. The goal of creating a student-centered classroom requires that we change our behavior. Such change is difficult to achieve and maintain.

When teaching collaboratively, however, we can rely on each other to reinforce our new styles of teaching. To do so, of course, we must know how to give and receive constructive criticism. We must be willing to ask ourselves and each other if we are reverting to earlier ways. Are we talking too much in class? Are we getting caught up in performing our expertise? Are we missing important cues from our students?

In one of our collaborative teams, one of us called his co-teacher after the second or third class to ask how she felt things were going. Already doubtful about his own performance, he wasn't too surprised when she replied, "Well, I think generally the class is going well, but I did want to bring something up with you. I've been finding it a bit hard to get into the discussion. and I think students are, too. Your enthusiasm and knowledge are wonderful, but I'm wondering if you're perhaps coming on too strong and keeping students from participating at the level we want them to."

In another instance, the level of trust and comfort between teachers had reached the point that when one was beginning to dominate the class, the other team member was able, without creating hard feelings, to restrain him by delivering a harmless yet firm kick under the desk.

Finally, collaborative teaching can help us overcome the frequent sense of isolation felt by many faculty members. The problem has been well described by Roberta Matthews (1994):

Traditional modes of teaching tend not to facilitate mutual support or encouragement. Some faculty members can expect never to be visited by a colleague (except, perhaps, during formal, judgmental observations) or to engage in sustained conversations about one's discipline or teaching except with an office mate or close friend. Large departmental discussions often address highly charged agenda topics, about which individuals, sometimes disconcerted by colleagues' attitudes, make feeble or watered-down statements designed for public consumption or retreat into silence. Neither the chance conversation nor the large forum lends itself to the thoughtful exploration of different approaches and points of view, and the victim is too often the teacher. (187)

Most of our exchanges with colleagues about teaching are restricted to grouching over poor student writing or the frustrations of lackluster discussions. Collaborative teachers offer each other a much-needed sounding board for sharing the excitements as well as the perplexities and disappointments of particular class sessions. They also develop, out

of their common experience, the chance to engage in more philosophical explorations about teaching.

Collaborative pedagogy holds much promise, but only if faculty members themselves can learn to become better collaborators. Both our classroom research and the literature on learning indicate that students learn from the behavior we model--whether we are mindful of it or not. If we preach collaboration but practice in isolation, or team-teach with inadequate preparation, 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. At the same time, we will contribute to the rebuilding of a sense of community in higher education.

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By Betty Robinson and Robert M. Schaible

Betty Robinson is an associate professor of social and behavioral sciences, and Robert M. Schaible is an associate professor of arts and humanities at Lewiston-Auburn College of the University of Southern Maine in Lewiston. Reaping the Benefits

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