

July 5, 2016

To: Colleagues
Fr: David Lopatto and Doug Hess
Re: Team Teaching

Faculty colleagues (Steve Andrews, Andy Hamilton, Doug Hess, David Lopatto, Elizabeth Queathem, Chris Ralston, Kirsten Russell, and Steve Sieck) convened a Team-Teaching Workshop (June 6-8, 2016) to discuss several readings, as well as their own experiences and observations, about collaborative instructional methods. We were also visited by Vida Praitis, Sam Rebelsky, and Jim Swartz, who contributed valuable reflections and observations.¹

Based on the workshop, readings, and additional discussions, the organizers (Hess and Lopatto) collect in this memo our thoughts on what we have learned. After summarizing the characteristics and challenges of team-taught courses, we sketch a preliminary model of the phases involved in the design and implementation of a team-taught course. We also suggest some factors and resources that could be helpful for successful team teaching.

Summary

The literature suggests several varieties of team teaching, including “tag team” (successive) teaching, mentor/apprentice teaching, coordinated sections/crossover courses, and collaborative teaching. Of particular interest at Grinnell is the collaborative model in which two or more instructors are concurrently present in the classroom and are jointly responsible for designing and implementing the course. Although not essential to the definition, much of our conversation implied an interdisciplinary course with instructors from different departments or disciplines.

Within that context, here is a summary of our observations:

- 1) Team-teaching efforts at Grinnell are of an *ad hoc* nature; with few exceptions (e.g., Policy Studies Concentration) team teaching is sporadic and irregular.
- 2) Most ideas for team teaching result from serendipitous connections between faculty members rather than from an analysis of curricular needs.
- 3) Discussant and readings generally agree on the potential benefits to faculty and students (especially when instructors approach the subject matter from different fields or sub-fields).
- 4) Team teaching requires different, or at least additional, skills from those faculty develop in “solo” teaching.

¹ Because the ideas expressed in the workshop occurred in group discussion, it is not possible to give individual attributions for these ideas.

- 5) Compared to solo teaching, collaborative instruction requires an additional, non-trivial amount of time from instructors in both the preparation and implementation of the course.
- 6) Team teaching presents problems for course and faculty evaluation.
- 7) Faculty to faculty tutorials are helpful in preparing team teaching and could be augmented by additional developmental activities, including class visits and workshops.

Observations from the Discussion and Readings²

Operational and Administrative Issues and Constraints. Much of the discussion of team teaching focused on operational and administrative issues, including the need for frequent instructor meetings during the preparation and implementation phases of the course. Generally, faculty found that collaborative team-taught courses require a non-trivial amount of additional time compared to “solo” teaching. Indeed, some instructors mentioned that other courses of theirs suffered during the semester in which they taught collaboratively. The readings strongly echoed the theme that a dedication of sufficient time is one of the most important resources necessary for successful team teaching.

There was also a sense that the “stars must align” in order for instructors to offer a collaborative course. The pressures on schedules that come from majors and departments needing to staff their core curriculum means that teams composed of the same faculty members may only be available infrequently. Because of this infrequency, the extra effort put into a team-taught course—by both faculty and the college—may not lead to a regular offering. Even if the course is repeated it can require additional effort from faculty because several years may have passed before schedules and opportunities align again. Moreover, significant changes to the course are often needed based on prior experience and alterations in team membership.

In addition to the staffing of departmental courses, it is also apparent that department or major needs, as well as decisions by the administration regarding adequate course size or student to faculty ratio, may affect the composition and size of the team-taught course. Seminars and 300-courses, which ordinarily have constrained enrollments, are attractive vehicles for team teaching. Pressures to increase enrollments, however, may erode the learning potential of a team-taught seminar or inhibit the scheduling of these courses.³

Finally, we note that some teams may include members who are not formally members of the faculty. The issues surrounding the status and rewards for non-faculty team members have not, to our knowledge, been discussed.

² Readers who wish to learn more about these issues should consult the works on our list.

³ Among our reading materials is a memo on team teaching from the Dean of Bowdoin College to the faculty in 2009. That memo asserts the “team teaching of upper level seminars, while offering potential benefits to students and faculty, is not a practice the College can regularly support at this stage.”

Instructional Design and Faculty Development. Both the workshop participants and the literature noted that collaborative teaching requires navigating new wrinkles in course design. For example, students may receive conflicting advice from faculty on assignments or face uncertainty regarding which instructor to work with. Handled properly, these elements can be strengths of a team-taught course. Handled poorly, the interdisciplinary nature and team instruction elements of the course can suffer. Both faculty and students need an explicit understanding of these dynamics to avoid confusion.

To work productively in a team, one reading advised that faculty need to develop both pedagogical self-awareness and the ability to negotiating differences in teaching methods and philosophy with other faculty. In addition, at the most basic level of production of collaborative courses, faculty need to be able to find and get to know potential team-mates before a course can be contemplated. In short, being an effective team teacher requires skills that are not developed as a solo practitioner.

While faculty to faculty tutorials are helpful in preparing a team-taught course, additional developmental activities, including workshops, class visits, and course-specific mentoring during the design stage (see diagram on last page) could provide the information and skills faculty need to avoid pitfalls in both course design and implementation, as well as facilitate acquaintance with peers and the idea of team teaching.

The complexities of team teaching involve risks in addition to those of solo teaching and it presents problems for course and faculty evaluation. The standard end-of-course evaluation process was created for a solo-taught course. Despite attempts to adjust the process (including multiple end-of-course forms and additional questions created by the instructors for faculty development) the evaluation process remains problematic for contract and merit reviews for faculty. Along with the additional time involved, these risks and evaluation problems can discourage team-teaching or, at least, discourage team teaching pre-tenure.

Faculty Benefits. We found the discussion of the benefits of team teaching to be intriguing and challenging. Instructors with team-taught experience and the readings identified benefits for faculty. Some learned new subject matter, sometimes one that assisted them in exploring new research. All learned about instruction by working with and observing their team members.

It was suggested that a principal faculty benefit of the collaborative model, where all instructors are in the classroom concurrently, is that of allowing the individual instructor to become a participant-observer, affording the benefits of both observing and being observed by peers while engaged in the course. Faculty also found value in the “I don’t know” experience, in which an instructor disclosed that they did not have all the answers to student questions, sometimes relying on their co-instructors for expertise.

Student Benefits. Student learning benefits were more difficult to articulate. Students are certainly exposed to content and methods from a new field, and they can function in pairs or groups consisting of students from different majors. Thus, they can learn team work, as well as respect for

the integrity of knowledge and analysis from other disciplines. One discussant suggested that multiple instructors increase the chances of a student finding a faculty mentor with whom they feel affiliated. Team teaching may also allow instructors to devise a better plan of action for struggling students.

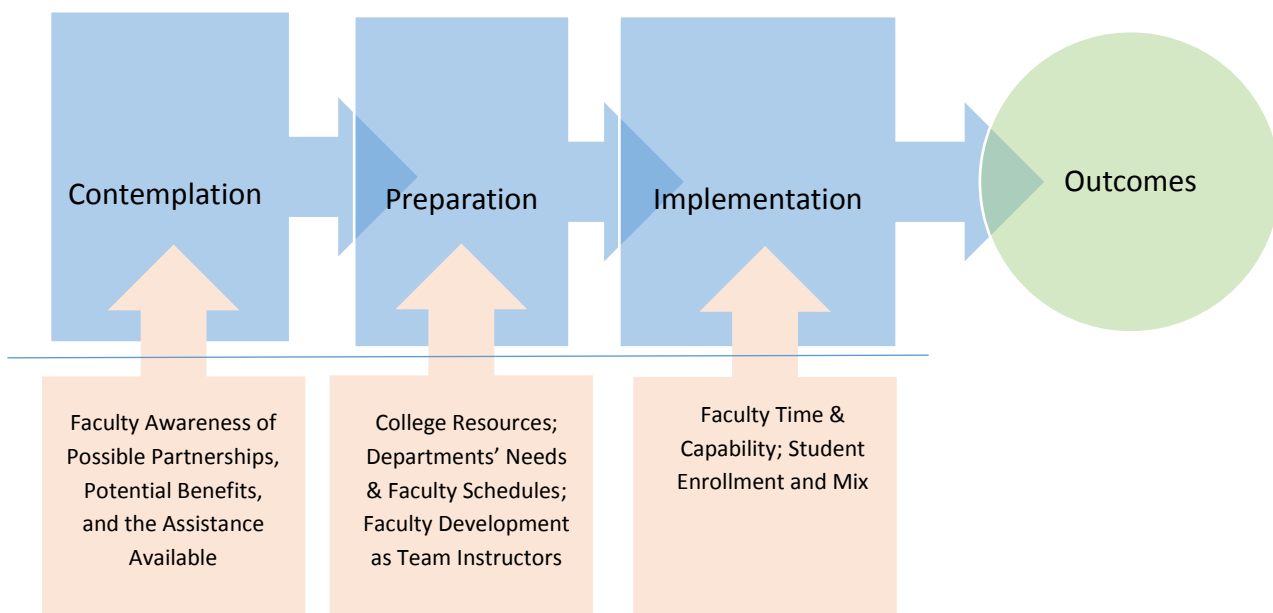
With regard to interdisciplinary courses, the team-teaching experience may be the most effective, if not the only, method of preparing students for future interdisciplinary research. The advanced team-teaching courses—for example, the Psychology Department’s Senior Seminar and the Policy Study Concentration’s 400-level course—approach a research-like experience.

Discussants occasionally described the team-taught course, especially those that were interdisciplinary, as “transformative” for the student. We attempted to explicate the meaning of this transformation. In part, it includes the development of engagement with the intellectual material, and a “hook” to a student’s interest that includes both intellectual and emotional engagement.

It was observed that students typically begin an advanced team-taught course with an existing framework for academic experience supplied by their progress in their major. The collaborative teaching experience, however, may afford the student the opportunity to reflect on this framework, yielding a greater understanding of their own choices for intellectual achievement. In other words, students gain a new point from which to view their own field and may lose some “disciplinary chauvinism.” Thus, by assimilating new and multiple perspectives, the student may be able to achieve a new level of creative thought.

Supports Necessary for Team Teaching

The reports from participants suggested a process model of designing and carrying out a collaboratively taught course. We have labeled the phases in this process contemplation, preparation, and implementation. In the diagram of this process below, we list some factors or resources below each phase that may increase the possibility that each phase runs well (or occurs at all). In turn, the quality of each phase influences both the ability of the institution to offer team courses and the professional and educational outcomes (i.e., the impact of the experience on faculty and students).



Contemplation of a team taught course can take several years. In this phase, two or more faculty informally discuss designing a course, or revisit one taught before, but are uncertain when or how it might occur. Supporting factors for this phase include faculty awareness of: team teaching and its benefits; colleagues with whom to form a team; and of assistance available for learning to team teach.

Preparation is the phase that includes intentional effort to plan a course. Until the alignment of interests and schedules occurs the course remains in the contemplation phase. Thus college and department needs and calendars influence the ability to move a course into preparation. Due to the differences in course design for team and solo instruction, the quality of course preparation can be assisted with development resources discussed above.

The implementation phase is the execution of the course. As with the preparation phase, this stage requires additional time and skills compared to solo instruction.

All of the forgoing produce the course outcomes. The outcomes of team-taught courses have gone largely unexamined in the literature. The assessment of team teaching efforts is modest and the ability to schedule a replication of the course is often problematic. An intentional program of assessment, therefore, provides an opportunity for our institution to contribute to this area. To enhance the potential for learning from each team-taught effort at Grinnell, we should coordinate assessment efforts and aggregate course information concerning student learning and attitude. It appears to us that the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment is the office to spearhead this effort.

Workshop Reading List

Bowdoin College memo (2009) by Cristle Collins Judd.

Burrell, et al. (2015). Team-based Curriculum Design as an Agent of Change. Teaching in Higher Education, 20, 753-766.

Higgins & Litzenberg. (2015). Transferring Experience through Team Teaching: A Chance of a Lifetime. College Teaching, 63, 105-111.

Leavitt. (2006). Team Teaching: Benefits and Challenges. The Center for Teaching and Learning Newsletter, Stanford University, 16, 1-4.

Marzluff, Moyer, & Skerrett (2010). Report on interdisciplinary team-teaching experiences. [Grinnell College memo available from the authors or Center on Teaching, Learning, and Assessment.]

Sibley (2006). Interdisciplinary Team Teaching: Negotiating Pedagogical Differences. College Teaching, 54, 271-274.