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Team Teaching: Benefits and Challenges

In recent years, team-taught courses have become an important part of the Stanford curriculum. Long an integral aspect of the Introduction to the Humanities (IHUM) program, team teaching has now found a place in many different departments, pro-



Professor Lanier Anderson

grams, and disciplines, at levels ranging from undergraduate lectures to graduate seminars. Team teaching boasts many pedagogical and intellectual advantages: it can help create a dynamic and interactive learning environment, provide instructors with a useful way of modeling thinking within or across disciplines, and also inspire new research ideas and intellectual partnerships among faculty. To experience the full benefits of team teaching, however, instructors must adjust their course planning and classroom management strategies to accommodate a collabora-

tive approach.

Professors Lanier Anderson (Philosophy) and Joshua Landy (French and Italian), who have team-taught several courses together, summed up some of the lessons taken from their experience in an Award-Winning Teachers on Teaching presentation during Winter Quarter 2005-2006. In the following, their suggestions for team-teaching, presented as a mock Decalogue, are interspersed with results from recent research on team teaching.

Thou shalt plan everything with thy neighbor.

Team teaching requires different preparation than traditional, single-instructor courses, particularly concerning the organizational aspects of course management. Careful and extensive planning can help instructors prevent disagreements down the line regarding assignments, grading procedures, and teaching strategies (Letterman and Dugan, 2004; Wentworth and Davis, 2002). Planning meetings also allow instructors to familiarize themselves with their partner's material, helping make the class a true team effort from the start. According to Landy, "Everyone on the team has to be behind every element of the course." While reaching this consensus may take a lot of time and compromise, in the end the extra

effort will result in a far more successful intellectual experience. As Cowan, Ewell, and McConnell (1995), a teaching team at City College of Loyola University in New Orleans, write, "Our joint planning sessions became interdisciplinary conversations into which we subsequently invited our students. These conversations were among the highlights of our teaching together (par. 5)."

Thou shalt attend thy neighbor's lectures.

One of the most important rules of team teaching, Landy says, is to "attend all meetings of the class. Never miss a colleague's lecture." Anderson and Landy use what is typically called



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an interactive teaching model, where all members of the teaching team are present during each course meeting. This model provides the most oppor-

tunity for the integration of different subjects and disciplines. However, when scheduling or budget constraints make this level of interaction unfeasible, there are different formats that can give students and instructors the experience of a team-taught course. For instance, in a rotational model, only one instructor is present at a time, but a series of instructors rotate throughout the course, teaching only the course topics that fall within their specialty. While the rotational model allows students to learn each aspect of the course material from an expert in the field, it has the disadvantage of forcing students to adjust to a new teacher's style several times over the course of a quarter (Morlock, 1988). In a dispersed team model, the course meets two or three times a week, once with all faculty members present, and once or twice more in sections with one faculty member present. This model "provides opportunities for integration and interaction" when the instructors teach together, but also provides "a small class environment" in a single-instructor scenario (McDaniels and Colarulli, 1997, p. 32). However, this model can limit the opportunity for students to hear multiple perspectives on the same topic, one of the core learning advantages of team teaching.

Thou shalt refer to thy neighbor's ideas.

The purpose of a team-taught course, from an educational standpoint, is to push students to achieve higher levels of synthesis and integration in their study of new material. It is, therefore, vitally important for instructors to model the process of integration by interweaving teaching partners' perspectives into each presentation. Often students are assigned projects that require them to integrate the material individual instructors have presented. Consequently, students have expressed a desire for teachers to demonstrate the same practice of integration in their own lectures

and presentations (Minnis and John-Steiner, 2005). Anderson and Landy integrate their different disciplinary approaches by referring to each other in lectures and presentations. By showing respect for each other's ideas, even when they may disagree, they are able

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to keep students interested and engaged in all aspects of the course material. Some teaching teams take a more direct approach, and assign one instructor during each class meeting the task of making connections among different course topics (Corcos, Durchslag, Morriss et al., 1997). Whichever method instructors choose, giving students the opportunity to observe integration in action helps them better understand instructors' expectations, as well as improve their own learning outcomes.

Thou shalt model debate with thy neighbor.

Team-teaching allows students to observe high-level intellectual debate among colleagues. Anderson and Speck describe this respectful debate as "professional disagreement" that is both "expert and collegial" (1998, p. 681). When such debates are successful, students learn to disagree without hostility. They also learn how to encounter new material through a variety of perspectives, and gain a practical knowledge of different academic disciplines. Watching instructors debate using different methodological approaches allows students to discover the advantages of different disciplines, and to understand which methodology best suits a particular line of inquiry. In addition, interdisciplinary debate encourages students to apply the skills of integration and collaboration to

other courses and assignments. "If you're trying to prepare students for interdisciplinary work themselves, then you really need to pay attention to modeling for the students what the disciplinary approaches are," Anderson says.

Thou shalt have something to say, even when thou art not in charge.

Although Anderson and Landy urge each member of the teaching team to be present during each course meeting, often only one instructor has the primary responsibility for presenting material on a certain day. What to do when you're not the one in charge? The instructor who is not presenting still has an opportunity to help students better understand the material by acting as an exemplary "student" (Hammer and Giordano, 2001). In Anderson and Landy's courses, the instructor who is not leading the class meeting often plays the role of a "kibitzer," sitting in the middle of the class and offering commentary on the other's presentation or lecture. "Have somebody sitting in the middle," Landy suggests. "It really encourages a kind of crossfire, and the sense that people are all equal participants in the process." Wentworth and Davis offer several suggestions for different roles the non-presenting teacher can play. Among them are: "model learner," in which the instructor asks questions and otherwise contributes to discussion; "observer," in which the instructor takes notes and gauges student response to the presentation; "discussion leader," in which the instructor facilitates or leads break-out groups; or "devil's advocate," in which the instructor raises provocative or challenging questions in an effort to stim-

ulate class creativity (Wentworth and Davis, 2002, p. 27).

Thou shalt apply common grading standards.

One of the benefits that team teaching offers students is an increase in the amount of feedback they receive from instructors (Wadkins, Miller, and Wozniak, 2006). Yet, students often worry whether instructors will apply consistent grading standards. Conflicts can emerge regarding the standards for evaluating student work, and instructors sometimes struggle to bridge their differences regarding evaluation procedures or criteria. Landy recommends, “You’d better find some way of having mutually agreed-upon standards. It’s best to be as explicit as you can about how you want to grade.” To ensure fairness in grading, some instructors design a specific grading rubric, tailored to the needs of a team-taught course. For instance, one teaching partnership devised the following system: “Papers that clearly met our expectations were read, responded to, and evaluated by just one teacher; others that the first reader deemed as not meeting expectations or ‘marginal’ were read by both teachers. Together, we would make suggestions and assign a point value for that section of the paper” (George and Davis-Wiley, 2000, p. 77). Like most aspects of team teaching, the extra time and attention devoted to grading strengthens instructors’ pedagogical practices, in this case by encouraging them to better understand the philosophy behind their grading procedures. For example, collaborative grading allowed Anderson to “understand much more explicitly what the grading standards are that I think are important and why.”

Thou shalt attend all staff meetings.

In addition to increased preparation time, successful team teaching also requires ongoing meetings among instructors to review and reassess their goals for the course. For many team teachers, meetings become the testing ground for

the sort of dialogic instruction they present in class. Meetings allow instructors time to plan upcoming courses, but also to reflect upon their progress thus far, and to compare their impressions regarding student response and engagement (George and Davis-Wiley, 2000). Anderson and Landy use meetings to “test the pulse of the course.” It is important to have regular class meetings, Landy urges, because in a team-teaching environment, “you have everyone pulling in different directions, and you need to keep a coherence in the course.”

Thou shalt ask open questions.

Students in team-taught courses learn new material by approaching it from many different perspectives. The dialogic structure of class meetings often stands in stark contrast to the lecture format to which many students and instructors are accustomed. Instructors must, therefore, adjust their teaching practices to invite many different responses to a particular question or issue. As Landy suggests, asking a question that is susceptible to multiple answers is very powerful, and also extremely hard to do. Yet he advises instructors to try to “ask some questions to which you really have no idea of the answer.” Doing so is a risk, but, as Anderson notes, it “takes students out

“...ask some questions to which you really have no idea of the answer.” Doing so is a risk, but, as Anderson notes, it “takes students out to the leading edge of knowledge” and shows them “what the production of knowledge is really like.”

to the leading edge of knowledge” and shows them “what the production of knowledge is really like.” Likewise, to gain the benefits of this mode of inquiry, students must stop searching for the “one right answer” to problems. Although many students enjoy the diversity of voices and viewpoints that emerge in the team-taught classroom, others struggle to

figure out the key points of a lesson when faculty choose to present many possible solutions to a problem (McDaniels and Colarulli, 1997). In some cases, faculty must work hard to overcome students’ resistance to the non-lecture format; a good first step is to be clear about the format of the course right from the start (Helms, Alvis, and Willis, 2005).

Thou shalt let thy students speak.

Team teaching can have a highly positive impact on student learning outcomes, largely due to the increased opportunity for student participation that team teaching provides. The presence of more than one instructor in the classroom increases the occasions for student-teacher interaction (Wadkins, Miller, and Wozniak, 2006). More importantly, a collaborative teaching environment invites students to take a more active role in the learning process. Because team teaching encourages a variety of perspectives on a topic, students are more likely to feel they can make valuable contributions to class discussions (Anderson and Speck, 1998). “It’s good, in the first few meetings, to set up a pattern in which people do intervene in the discussion from all kinds of angles,” Anderson notes. He and Landy make a conscious effort from the begin-

ning of the quarter to create a learning environment in which “student contributions are going to be valued and indeed expected.”

Thou shalt be willing to be surprised.

Part of the challenge of team teaching is putting yourself in a position where your own authority and expertise on a certain

topic may have to take a backseat. Faculty must make the shift from being “experts” to being “expert learners,” for in the collaborative classroom, teachers and students join in a shared process of intellectual discovery (Wentworth and Davis 2002, p. 23). Instructors generally agree that being prompted to look at a topic from a different angle can be one of the most rewarding experiences of participating in a teaching team. Teachers can “get out of their own conceptual boxes” and learn new approaches that will enhance their own research and writing (Corcos, Durchslag, and Morriss, 1995, p. 235). Anderson and Landy, for instance, have co-authored a paper that was inspired by the topics covered in the courses they have taught together. In addition to creating new research opportunities, team teaching can also encourage instructors to hone their pedagogical skills. Anderson remarks, team teaching “does raise your game, and sometimes quite dramatically so.”

As Landy says, team teaching gives professors the opportunity “to teach in a different way, and to learn in a different way.” It allows instructors to hone their pedagogical skills and develop new topics for research and scholarship. The benefits of team teaching extend to students as well, improving learning outcomes by offering increased student-teacher interaction, as well as a multi-dimen-

sional approach to subject matter. Ultimately, the advantages of team teaching far outweigh the time and energy it requires. Anderson and Landy describe themselves as “recidivists,”

returning time and again to the challenges, and the rewards, of team teaching. ♦

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VHS and DVD copies of Professors Anderson’s and Landy’s presentation are available at the CTL library and online at <http://ctl.stanford.edu/AWT>.

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