

Strategies for Success for Online Co-Teaching

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Abstract

A co-teaching online environment has the potential to help more efficiently meet the needs of online learners and provide greater satisfaction for instructors. A well-trained pair of instructors can complement each other, meeting student needs in a timely manner, as well as providing students with the opportunity to view topics from different perspectives, and to gain more in-depth feedback about their work. Specific strategies for a successful online co-teaching experience, including: how to create a successful online learning community; achieve effective course management; provide systematic, in-depth assessment of student learning; and providing timely feedback will be addressed. Methods to improve upon one-another's teaching strengths will be introduced as well as building community between your peer co-teacher and students.

Keywords: co-teaching, team teaching, online teaching

Introduction

A survey by the Sloan Consortium (2008) indicates that online learning is on the rise. Over 3.9 million students were taking online courses in 2007 and by the end of that year, over 20% of all higher education students in the United States had taken at least one online course (Sloan, 2008). During the past decade there has been a rise in the number of degrees available where a student never has to step onto a traditional college campus. Online courses are increasingly filling a niche for students who are far away from a regular campus, want to fit continuing education into their busy lifestyles, or want to take advantage of academic resources in other parts of the state, country, or even the world.

Downturns in the economy have traditionally been times when people have looked to educational opportunities to advance in their careers or to retrain (Sloan, 2008). Online learning can offer an alternative to "brick and mortar" institutions for those seeking to retrain or further their education. For instance, online education offers the flexibility that adult students need to fit higher education into busy lives. With today's advanced technology, students all over the country and those living overseas have high-quality education in nearly every subject area available to them. Synchronous and asynchronous learning models, video conferencing, online chats, podcasts, lecture capture, and the ability to access course materials from highly-portable devices, provide students with modes for learning and accessing the information in a variety of ways.

Diversity is a further benefit of online learning (Hulbert & McBride, 2004). Students are afforded the chance to work with peers and are exposed to multiple perspectives because of differing experiences and geography.

While online learning does have many benefits, it does have some challenges compared to the face-to-face model of instruction. Depending on the format of the course, one disadvantage can be the lack of immediate feedback from an instructor. When students are on a traditional college campus, they are able to ask clarifying questions about concepts being presented and receive immediate responses. When

assignments are introduced, instructors can quickly clarify or explain their expectations. Online students do not always have the opportunity for immediate feedback and this can create anxiety and frustration for students (Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Diaz, 2002). Online students are often unfamiliar with the types of discourse that occur in an electronic classroom and need time to familiarize themselves with the online platform. These issues have the potential to cause students to be overwhelmed in an online classroom forum and may contribute to drop out and attrition rates.

Gibson (1998) found that there are several predictors of success in online programs: Student factors (motivation, perseverance, and academic self-concept), situational factors (life circumstances, employee and family support), and educational system factors (including the quality of the instructional materials, the difficulty of materials, and the availability of instructor tutoring and support) (Diaz, 2002).

There are two prevalent models for online instruction. One in which the instructor designs the online curriculum, and manages student discussions and assessments while teaching the course alone. A different model features the instructor facilitating an existing online course, managing and evaluating discussions and assessments where the curriculum has already been determined. With a single instructor, students have one “go to” person for questions. However, if the instructor is not online, the students may need to wait a day or more to get an answer to their question. Because many courses are self-paced and students have only a certain number of hours to dedicate to their course work per week, they often require a quick response time. For many institutions offering online instruction, it is expected that the instructor response time to a student will be within 24 to 48 hours. Online students often have very limited schedules and if, for example, they are doing coursework on a Saturday morning for an assignment due the next day, they may need instructor support more quickly.

Just as is the case with an instructor in a traditional classroom setting, teaching online solo has its challenges. Providing adequate and extensive feedback to all students can be difficult and time-consuming in both settings. But, in online courses, where often there are weekly threaded-discussions, this may mean that the instructor must carefully read, respond, and evaluate hundreds of posts per week. As the numbers of online students increase and as the needs of the online learner become more diverse, managing courses and providing high-quality instruction can prove to be very challenging for those teaching online courses alone.

There are other difficulties to be considered about solo teaching online, one of which is the potential of feeling isolated. When the classroom is a computer screen, instructors do not have the benefit of face-to-face informal, collegial conversations that might occur at an on-campus institution. Co-teaching online is a potential solution to provide faculty with the chance to collaborate with colleagues and provide students the support they need to be successful. In addition, co-teaching can build professional and supportive relationships between faculty and can result in a richer learning experience for the both students and teachers.

A Case for Co-Teaching Online

For the past two decades, co-teaching has proven to be an effective approach for K-12 educators, who have used it to improve practice and instruction and better meet the diverse needs of students. This strategy also has the potential for those teaching online as a means to improve practice and instruction and better meet the diverse needs of students. Co-teachers work closely to develop a common syllabus, integrate their various perspectives, select topics, and share teaching activities (Letterman & Dugan, 2004). Cook and Friend (2005) define *co-teaching* as a variation of team teaching which involves two or more instructors sharing planning and instruction for a group of diverse students in a single, physical space. When referring to co-teaching online, this definition can be modified to describe the teaching that goes on in a “single *learning* space.” Although online instructors do not have the same type of contact with their students, they are responsible for creating a positive and productive classroom environment in a way very similar to those who are co-teaching in a face-to-face classroom.

There are many approaches to co-teaching, from those where instructors have done some planning together, but have little interaction in the online course, to models where course content and pedagogy are completely integrated, with each instructor responsible for all the content of the course (Shapiro & Dempsey, 2008). In K-12 education, researchers have noted that co-teaching produces positive effects on student performance in high school (Jang, 2006), benefits to English Language Learners have been noted (Zehr, 2006), and diverse students populations have shown academic growth (Gately, 2005).

Educators in various content areas such as science and mathematics have also noted the advantages of co-teaching (Scantlebury, Gallo-Fox, & Wassell, 2008; Syh-Jong, 2007; Magiera, Smith, & Zigmund, 2005). At the college level, a co-teaching approach is one way for experts in different content areas to merge their expertise to help the learning process (Gillespie & Israetel, 2008). However, there is little research about the benefits of co-teaching in an online college classroom.

Online students and instructors can also potentially benefit from this teaching strategy, which has been effective in the traditional college classroom in many ways. Exposure to different points of view on the same topic is one potential benefit. Even if co-teaching pairs are working within the same discipline, working with two instructors allows students the chance to experience different points of view on the topics presented, so there are more opportunities to examine information and make it relevant to students' lives. The co-teaching model also allows students to access the content from different perspectives (Letterman & Dugan, 2004).

Another way that students can benefit from working with co-instructors is in the timeliness and the amount of feedback received. An effective online teaching team can ensure that students' queries are answered in a timely manner, which can serve to reduce frustration for students. In addition, potential technology problems, questions about course materials, and assignments can be dealt with quickly with two instructors managing the course. Working with co-instructors can also allow students more rich feedback from instructors with different experiences and points of view.

Becoming part of the classroom community can sometimes be a struggle for online students. Because there may be no face-to-face time in an online course, it may be difficult to build a connection with other students and the instructor. With two instructors working to build a learning community, there may be a stronger potential for students feel a sense of belonging to that community.

Co-teaching online also has many of potential benefits for instructors, as well. Just as it is beneficial for student to be exposed to different perspectives, teaching with a peer can afford co-teachers the opportunity, as well as the chance to engage more deeply in philosophical discussions about course content (Hulbert & McBride, 2004; Letterman & Duggan, 2004). The online environment is the perfect place for experts from different content areas to share scholarly resources and learn from one another. In addition, collaboration between peers can reduce the feeling of isolation that sometimes occurs in an online learning environment (Palloff & Pratt, 2005).

A further benefit of online collaboration is the ability to share the course workload. At many institutions online, especially in the for-profit sector (e.g., Walden University, Capella University, University of Phoenix, Axia, Kaplan.), courses run continually without a break and management and assessment of courses can be exhausting. With the ability to share responsibilities, co-teaching allows high-quality instruction to continue as instructors manage other obligations.

Challenges with Co-Teaching Online

Although there are many benefits to online co-teaching, instructors should be aware there are potential difficulties and identifying these issues ahead of time allows instructors the chance to be pro-active and make plans to address these problems before they arise. One possible problem is different teaching styles (Shapiro & Dempsey, 2008). For instance, one instructor may have a didactic approach, where another prefers to facilitate Socratic discussions. As with face-to-face classrooms, a variety of teaching approaches can be beneficial to meet the varied needs of students in an online setting. In developing the course, instructors should discuss which approach prior to the beginning of the class that makes the most sense for the content being introduced and choose the appropriate method.

One of the most difficult things about co-teaching is that it takes more time than teaching a course solo (Letterman & Dugan, 2004). Discussions about educational philosophy, approaches to online teaching, course content, course management, and mitigating online classroom issues that may arise, all take an investment of time up front and require discussion with a co-teaching peer.

Another possible problem is equity in managing, assessing, and evaluating coursework assigned to students. Occasionally, one instructor may feel more burdened, taking on additional responsibilities for the course because the other instructor is not present. For example, within the discussion forum if one instructor is posting more regularly, that instructor may become the "point person" for the students. Additional emails, questions, and discussion forum questions may then be addressed to that instructor;

the students expect that person to answer questions, even if the responsibility was initially that of the other instructor as decided upon in previous meetings, or outlined course expectations. This can also be compounded if the non-participating instructor makes a 'cameo' appearance, answers a few questions cryptically, or opposite of the other teacher, again creating additional work for the instructor participating more in the discussion forum. There are hurdles to overcome in online co-teaching, but there are attitudes that one can adopt, as well as strategies that can be put into place to help ensure that both students and instructors get the most out of this learning experience.

Elements of Successful Online Co-teachers

Although online co-teaching has many benefits, it is not for everyone. There are several elements that must be in place for this type of teaching experience to work effectively. Instructors must have an open mind as to the benefits of this approach. If working with a peer seems like an effective learning model for students, it is more likely that instructors will put more time into learning about this approach. Co-teaching, as is the case with any new endeavor, takes some extra work initially as co-instructors learn to share course ideas and goals. However, co-teaching also has many benefits, including the potential of a richer learning experience for students and more day-to-day flexibility for the instructors.

Clear and Frequent Communication

Effective and regular communication is important for co-teaching. This does not need to be looked at as an additional burden in terms of overall time, but regular brief interactions to be sure that you are "on the same page." Communication can come in many forms, from discussions about course policies and assessments, to conversations about how to handle student issues, to feedback about teaching approaches. Barisonzi and Thorn (2003) suggest that co-teaching is more successful if both instructors have a clear understanding of each other's portions of the course. If instructors avoid compartmentalizing, they are each able to address issues that arise in the course. This improves course management, and also can model interdisciplinary thinking for students. In addition, Shapiro and Dempsey (2008) found benefits to observing each other's teaching in that they could provide useful feedback about ways to improve.

Using any new teaching approach can be challenging, so co-instructors should anticipate that there might be unforeseen problems that pop up. Communicating a plan for how to deal with potential conflict is immensely helpful (Letterman & Dugan, 2004). For example, instructors may agree on a plan on how to manage the course load if one person is away at a conference or has a particularly busy schedule that week. Of course, regular and systematic communication with students is vital, as well. Because online students are typically juggling many other things in addition to coursework, some flexibility is in order. Communication and flexibility from instructors and students is key: encourage students to let both instructors know if work will be late as soon as possible. Instructors should check student participation frequently and reach out to students who have not turned in work to devise a plan to successfully complete the work. Regular, brief interactions, should take place to be sure that you can "speak with one voice" when students come with questions or problems about the course.

Clarify Specific Goals

Arguably the most important aspect of co-teaching in any environment is that both instructors have a clear understanding of student learning goals. At the beginning of the course, co-teachers should take the time to clarify and explain goals, approaches, and teaching strategies. Students can benefit from a variety of instructional approaches, but instructors should discuss which is the best approach for a given learning situation. As with face-to-face classrooms, a variety of teaching approaches can be beneficial to meet the varied needs of students in an online setting. In developing the course, instructors should discuss which approach makes the most sense for the content being introduced and choose the appropriate method.

Ask the question, "What do we want our students to know and be able to do after completing this course?" Because of different backgrounds, content areas, levels of expertise, and approaches, instructors may find that they have very different answers to this question. Taking the time to "hammer out" goals can be difficult, but is very important to the success of the course. It may require compromise, but negotiating goals up front is vital for ensuring that instructors work together successfully and that students have a valuable learning experience.

Create an Online Learning Community

Community building is important and should be considered right at the very beginning of a course (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Creating a successful online learning community begins with students feeling a connection to the course content and their instructors, as well as online colleagues. As mentioned, before the course begins, instructors should discuss course expectations and policies and then clearly outline these decisions for the students during the first week (Letterman & Dugan, 2004). It is also beneficial to have instructors post an informational web page, with contact information, background information, and research interests. Providing a photo and overview of hobbies can sometimes help students feel more connected to their online instructors.

In addition, having students post their own personal introductory pages with contact information, an optional photograph, what their interests are, and why they are interested in the course topics can also help build a sense of community. This should be optional and students can share whatever information they feel comfortable sharing, but these pages can help connect a face to a name during the course.

Students need to be assured that, in addition to instructor support, there are other services that will help ensure their success. Personally calling students to welcome them to the course is an additional way to build a sense of community within an online course and is a task that can be divided between instructors. In addition, instructors can split responsibilities in researching university resources that are available for support for students (writing center, disability services, advising, library, materials support, etc.), and post information for students and/or be a point of contact regarding a particular resource. In addition, although technical support is usually available for students, team instructors can help answer questions quickly about things like when a book edition changes, websites, helpful software, or other recommended resources.

Many students communicate with instructors via email, but it is also helpful for both the teachers and the students to set up several online “office hours” during the semester. These can be optional to students, but can be “attended” by one or both instructors. Many online courseware modules have chat software with virtual blackboards, which can help instructors meet with students. In addition, programs such as Skype, free software that allows users to make free calls and video chats over the internet, can also be used. Many times students will join these chats to ask clarifying questions, but also to connect to other members of the community in a way that not always possible to do online.

Effective Course Management

Because so many students are doing coursework in addition to full time job and family responsibilities, online students often feel a sense of urgency about completing the course requirements from week to week. Students have a finite number of hours to dedicate to their course work per week, often have a specific schedule in which they need to complete the work, and need to have quick response time from instructors. Dividing course tasks between the instructors will result in a more positive and supportive environment for the learners. Co-teachers should establish an initial ‘game plan’ one week prior to the course starting, as to how to address the needs of the students and facilitating learning as the course proceeds.

A helpful approach is to ask students to always email both instructors when corresponding about the course, thereby, the first instructor who can reply will do so, allowing the student to get more immediate feedback. Many institutions ask online instructors to try to respond to student emails within 24 hours from the time of the query. Co-teachers can alternate checking student emails during the week to can get answers to the students back in a more timely manner.

Dividing tasks between the online instructors is essential. For example, instructors should decide who is going to provide immediate additional resources to the students. This could include providing clarity about course materials, how to function within the course netiquette, how to respond within the course site, impending dates for assignments, and general tips for being successful in the course. Dividing the tasks can help manage the teaching and learning experience effectively, but sharing the task is another approach, which can enhance the learning experience for students. Because instructors often have different backgrounds and approach the content from different perspectives, sometimes it is helpful to have both respond to student questions (this is another benefit of having students email both instructors for all emails).

Co-Managing Assessment of Student Learning

Effective assessment goes hand-in-hand with clear learning goals. Course assessment tools must link established goals. In developing course assessments, rubrics or checklists can be an effective way to both communicate goals clearly, as well as give in-depth feedback about a student's performance against targeted goals. Instructors can grade several assignments together to ensure that their evaluation of performance is reliable and then the work can be easily divided from there. Grouping students so that they receive feedback from both instructors, allows students the opportunity to gain insights from instructors who may have different perspectives on the topic.

Prompt, effective data collection and evaluation of student learning can be difficult for one instructor. Co-teaching helps to alleviate this issue in a variety of ways. The most important aspect of effectively assessing online learning is for the instructors to take the time to discuss the goals of course assessments and to be clear on what concept or skill is being targeted. Assessment tools should be built with those target goals in mind.

Evaluating work can sometimes cause problems for online team instructors. For instance, problems can arise if one teacher is an easier grader with lower expectations of students than the other teacher. What is required for each grade must be determined and adhered to by both instructors. The guidelines must be posted and clearly stated for all the students, and discussed at length by the team teachers so that they both have the same answer regarding requirements. This can be problematic as well if the "easy grader" is seen as the preferred teacher so the student can receive a better grade.

Another difficult situation can arise if student papers are being graded and turned back to the student more quickly by one teacher than the other teacher (Letterman & Dugan, 2004). Because students often communicate with each other 'behind the scenes', comparisons are quickly made and a barrage of emails results from students. This again creates additional work and stress for the 'quicker' teacher. This can be remedied by simply having a conversation with the team teacher on agreed due dates that papers will be sent back, something that works for both instructors, and sending back all papers on the same day. The students do not need to be notified of this date as long as it is within the college requirements. A quick check between the co-teachers on the paper due date will prevent time being spent on answering unnecessary emails about when student 'X' is going to receive his paper.

Other Recommendations for Successful Collaborative Co- Teaching

Because of the nature of online teaching, it is important that each instructor has a strong technology background and has some experience with facilitating online learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). At the very least, each person should go through extensive training in the online platform to be used. If members of the team have varying amounts of expertise using the online platform in place, the burden of organizing materials, setting course module release dates, setting up collaborative groups, and using the many tools available to online instructors can fall upon one person. Most organizations offering online courses provide instructors with training modules and these should be taken advantage of so that the bulk of the course teaching time is spent on focusing on students versus trying to get the technology to work.

Online platforms can allow for those planning on co-teaching to "virtually visit" other classrooms, chat with peers who have successful and long-standing co-teaching relationships and get suggestions and, if possible, visit their classroom to get a feel for how they implement policies and procedures together, and see how they manage assessments, as well as the presentation of materials.

Conclusion

The use of several simple strategies can also help ensure that online learning is a valuable and stress-free experience for students. Co-teaching can offer students a wider knowledge base from which students can draw, offers a more varied personality base with which they can be compatible, and can expose students to a variety of assessment methods and learning techniques (Klein, 1990; Shapiro & Dempsey, 2008). Planning, communication, and organization can help make a team teaching experience a collegial one for instructors. Exposure to new approaches, new methods, and new philosophies can help even the most experienced teacher keep "green and growing."

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Manuscript received 24 Mar 2011; revision received 22 August 2011.



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