

**NOTES from “Co-Teaching: Examples of Successful Teaching Relationships”
Tuesday, Nov. 11, 2008**

**Featured discussants: Merle Bruno, Chris Jarvis, Kristen Luschen, Abraham Ravett,
Natalie Sowell.**

Chris Jarvis & Merle Bruno: Human Biology

- It is recommended that all NS faculty co-teach their first year when this is possible. Merle and Chris have been co-teaching for 12 years. Chris has also taught an intensive January term course with Lynn Miller for 12 years.
- Human Biology is a case-based course intended primarily for first semester students in which students work on solving real medical “cases” and in the process learn the biology and the process of asking and addressing scientific questions.
- The first few years they taught the course, students were divided into 3 big groups of 10-12. Later they broke up into smaller groups of 4-6. Faculty realized that they had to “let go” of participating in all of the groups. A key intention of this style was to challenge students in ways that sometimes frustrate them – to give them problems worth solving that don’t necessarily have easy answers, and then ask them to develop lists of questions they need to pursue in order to solve the case. Students use text and web sources to answer some of their questions and then ask the faculty to find out the answers to questions they can’t on their own, such as physical exam and laboratory results, medical history, etc.
- With students working in small groups, allowing faculty to move around and listen in or sometimes sit in on a group’s deliberations, students don’t slip through the cracks so easily. At the start of the semester, we form the groups randomly, mixing students who have strong backgrounds in biology with students who are nervous about learning science. Roles are given to each student to help them bring their strengths to the group and to gain confidence when they are uncertain about their knowledge. The co-teachers connect and bond because of constant discussion about student progress.
- With regard to papers, both read all the student papers in the early classes. Quickly they realized that they were offering the same comments, so now they split the papers. Given that one of them is more harsh (versus gentle) with comments, they each have the chance to read different papers from each student. They explain to the students that harsh versus gentle aspect explicitly. All students are introduced to reading the primary literature at the same time, and these form the basis for their own critical papers which are revised several times. This was like boot camp for them; they formed small groups and worked together.
- Sometimes the class is taught as a tutorial. (The entire class is comprised of their advisees.) The co-teachers cover for one another and share insights about the students, and they sometimes forget which student is on their advisee list, so students get double advising and the advisors get back up.
- Chris commented that since he and Merle were coming from two different fields – organ systems vs. the cellular level – the co-teaching worked very well.
- Merle said that co-teaching is like marriage. Eventually very subtle cues may be given to the partner, and are immediately understood. This makes for a comfortable teaching situation. Every year different medical cases are chosen or written to present to students.
- If new faculty members co-teach with an established team, it is sometimes difficult. There are unspoken concerns, and sometimes things may seem irrational. However there is much to be learned by new and old if faculty understand it is important to explain and discuss the rationale for how they are working. This also helps the older faculty review and question their own approaches, and that kind of reflection is a valuable tool for improvements.

- Working collaboratively with a seasoned faculty member, there is always something to look forward to. Content is new. The syllabus can shift a bit. It is easier to take more risks. Feedback from students is very useful for fine-tuning the course. The co-teachers explain to students that they will feel frustrated during parts of the analysis but just need to hang on. Eventually they will come to an understanding of the solution they can defend. They have to learn to trust the process.

Abe Ravett & Chris Perry: Non-Fiction Film

- Abe has been co-teaching ever since he arrived. He taught for a long time with Len Glick, a medical doctor who became an anthropologist.
- Abe stressed the importance of humor. Len was efficient and conscientious – “like a machine” - on matters of detail. In the classroom, he interacted well with students. There was a good vibe and the energy was very positive. There was no tension or showmanship.
- Abe had worked with Chris previously on several exams. They collaborated well together – two different mediums interacting in a “performative environment.”
- In considering co-teaching with another colleague, it’s important to consider what subject matter both could learn from. That is an important aspect of a strong collaboration in the classroom.
- Their teaching is complementary - non-fiction and animation converge. One of the challenges was finding time outside of class to talk.
- Chris began by taking a previous syllabus and then adding to it and modifying it.
- It is very useful to see how other people teach. Faculty are lucky to work with people in different schools in an inter-disciplinary way.

Natalie Sowell and Kristen Luschen: Critical Pedagogy in Action

- With co-teaching, communication is key. Important to bounce ideas off one another.
- Kristen talked about the difference between performance and education
- They had three TAs for class, who were teaching the class also – so the faculty could process what was going on. Once a week, they would meet with the TAs and laugh a lot! They would discuss concerns about any student(s), and made a good teaching team.
- They used syllabi from two different perspectives. This provided a different way of thinking through theories.
- Beginning in childhood, learning is connected to trust in a relationship. Faculty working with one another have to be able to “let go” to some degree. They can’t have all things in place all the time. Trusting a partner in teaching involves a degree of risk. It works because of successful co-teaching experiences in the past.
- Regarding junior and senior colleagues, older faculty are sometimes set in their ways, and this might be challenging for new faculty in a co-teaching situation.

Myrna Breitbart spoke about the challenges presented in teaching across two very different disciplines in a tutorial that brought together the fields of urban studies and theater, and was co-taught with Natalie Sowell. Because the class was offered as a tutorial, some first-year students were either simply assigned to it, or chose to take it based on their interest in either theatre or urban studies. Had the class been offered at the 200 level, students would have chosen the class based on their interest in exploring the intersection of theater/urban studies, as intended by both faculty.

Sue Darlington has co-taught with a number of faculty including Len Glick who was a walking library – huge resource of knowledge. Now Sue and Ryan Joo are co-teaching a class in Buddhist Studies.

Annie Rogers taught a course with Jill Lewis after discovering a mutual fascination with Virginia Woolf. Could they conjure up a course on Woolf and Lacan? What if they added Proust? They realized they did not have the time to really design such a course during the school semester, but could write a faculty grant to work on it over the summer break. So they visited each other in England and Ireland, and created an intensive tutorial in a co-mentoring situation. The most important challenge was how to structure and run the class, and how to engage the students with such dense and potentially difficult texts. They had different approaches, which made the design of a course all the more exciting. Together they created their own space and funding for the new course.

Falguni Sheth – co-taught with Margaret and Wilson (sociologists). Big differences in methodology. This helped to depersonalize the teaching, as the approaches were unlike.

Bob Rakoff stressed the importance of having a syllabus and being very organized. The mood in the classroom always needs to be respectful. It is critically important that both teachers have some sense of humor. Discuss what role would you like to play beforehand.

Thom Haxo spoke about “Working Across the Arts.” Three faculty were involved. The syllabus was critically important. The project involved poetry, theatre and 3D. Three classes were offered each week, three short and one long. There were group projects and mini projects. The class was divided and students went into different areas. After two or three weeks, students transferred to a different instructor and area. The model was very fruitful – as if three trains were running at one time. The course was offered for three consecutive years and was very popular. Students felt ownership of their own work. The work relies on the personality and involvement of the individual student.

Several comments about writing evaluations in a co-taught course: Chris Perry found that it was effective to write the evaluations together with the co-faculty person for a full picture. Merle said that she and Chris Jarvis divided them up and wrote the evaluations of students whose final papers they had been reading. Then just before finalizing, each read the other's evaluations to make minor tweaks or add additional information they knew about that student's work. Over time, they picked up phrases from one another that helped writing future evaluations. They also wrote detailed mid-semester evaluations that served as substantial drafts for the final evaluations. Even though this took a lot of time at a busy time of the semester, it was worth it at the end of the semester, and, since the mid-semester evaluation does not appear anywhere, it was possible to give students clear messages about what they were doing well and where they needed to focus extra effort, and to give the message to students that these topics would be addressed in the final evaluation.

Other comments:

- Sometimes faculty are not well organized, or there is competition between them. They need to be “professionally conscientious.” It is not true that two friends should teach all the time! Co-teaching is best when there is less ego, and more confidence.
- Co-teaching works best when there is playoff between two people – it is anecdotal in form. In class, the co-teachers discuss how to proceed.

Thoughts to take away from this workshop - Co-teaching works best when:

- Faculty members bring different perspectives to the class.
- They share a basic sense of comfort and humor with one another creating a spontaneous atmosphere.
- They have collaborated well in creating a new syllabus.
- Faculty present a consistent attitude (if one is good cop, the other is bad cop)
- Each teacher needs to trust and respect the other in class. Best to have a solid relationship before co-teaching.
- Having two working instructors allows for a greater range of activities, small groups, and different projects – more versatility.