

Team Teaching – additional notes

Presumably, if you have selected this topic as an item for a professional development session it will be because:

- You are thinking of doing some team teaching

or

- You already do some team teaching and want to check on or refine your practice

Whatever your reasons, this session should give you opportunities to create a departmental view of team teaching and its advantages and disadvantages to both teachers and students.

What is team teaching?

Team teaching can be more than simply two colleagues sharing a classroom with a group of students. Each type will have its own reasons for doing it that way but also potential pitfalls which we ought to be aware of and do something to minimise. So, what variations are there?

- Two colleagues share the teaching of a lesson for one class
- Two colleagues share the teaching of a lesson for a larger than normal group
- Both the above for discrete parts of the lesson such as the launch or connection phase or the plenary or reflection phase
- Two colleagues might share the teaching for a topic via videoconferencing
- An additional variation might be in the learning environment e.g. learning out of the classroom – in the field or in the hall

Advantages – for the students

There is no question that for some students team teaching has clear advantages some of the time

Team teaching can lead to increases in understanding and retention. Coming into contact with more than one teacher in the same learning experience may

allow students to gain a more mature level of understanding and may help them to consider different viewpoints rather than one person's black and white way of looking at the world. In addition, the variety of teaching approaches can reach a greater variety of learning styles.

Advantages - for the teachers

Two individuals working together to plan anything will almost inevitably be more creative than two individuals working on their own. Add into the mix the desire to be professional in front of a colleague and the opportunities to see how someone else might "do it" and we can see that there are clear advantages for the teachers involved. Team teaching can allow two colleagues to play to their own strengths. One might be more proficient at questioning whilst another may have a flair for drama. Colleagues might feel more willing to take risks and try new ideas in the supportive environment created by team teaching. Working as we often do in our own classrooms for most of the time can lead to a situation where we become stale and rely on tried and tested methods and may not be aware or have forgotten that there are other ways of doing things. Two colleagues in a room together can help with discipline and can provide extra support for those who need it and extra challenge for others.

Disadvantages - for the students

Some students may feel uncomfortable or threatened by hearing slightly different versions of the same idea. Some, often high achieving students, want to be told what to learn and feel less comfortable with less didactic lessons. If a group is larger than usual, some students can feel lost or become anonymous or may indeed choose to become so. Combining groups may result in a lack of space for good learning. Some students may be able to put up with some inconvenience for a while but some may not. Putting two groups together may also result in variations on tribal animosity which needs to be thought about and managed.

Disadvantages – for the teachers

One of the prerequisites for effective team teaching is the need for planning and this takes time. It may be that the amount of time needed is not greater than planning your own lesson but finding the time to plan with someone else can be more problematic. Similarly, some sort of debrief or post lesson conversation is essential and finding the time for that may not always be easy. When any group comes together it usually goes through stages, one of which is the “storming” stage so called because that is the time when disagreements tend to surface. This is quite usual and will pass but can be the point at which some teams fall apart. If your partner in the team lacks emotional intelligence the experience of sharing a learning environment with them might be one you don’t want to repeat. Making sure that you are compatible is a wise move.

No matter what ...

There are some pretty important things we must bear in mind when choosing to team teach:

- Be absolutely clear about why you are doing it. What do you want from the experience – for your students as well as for your selves. What is the intended impact of what you intend to do. Team teaching badly done will be worse than teaching in the traditional way.
- Know who you are teaching with in terms of their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Play to your respective strengths or take the opportunity to strengthen a weakness while being supported by someone else. You don’t need to be best friends but you do need mutual respect. Flexibility and a willingness to compromise are essential.
- Do take the time to plan what you are going to do. Time spent on this will pay dividends. Striking a balance between sticking to the plan slavishly and going where the lesson takes us is no easy matter and thinking together about what might happen is time well spent.

- Make time soon after to talk about what happened. See it as an opportunity to learn and avoid the temptation to blame the students for things that didn't go as well as you hoped. Hopefully, your team teaching will not be a one off so do what we all should do and learn from what went well and what didn't.
- Be aware of the potential pitfalls and problems that might crop up and plan to minimise their impact. If you are aware that there may be one or two students who will feel threatened by being in a larger group is there something you could do to make them feel more secure?

What next?

By now you will have thought about different ways of team teaching and have become aware of the advantages and disadvantages and be in an informed position to move forwards. Take some time to plan what you are going to do but be strategic in your planning. Think of the short term as well as the medium and long-term development of team teaching as part of your professional practice.