OPINION PIECE

Co-teaching in higher education: Reflections from an early career academic

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Abstract

Co-teaching has been regularly used as a pedagogical tool in K-12 and postsecondary learning environments for decades, yet its practice in higher education institutions has only recently started to grow in popularity. This paper builds on recent recommendations for effective co-teaching in tertiary teaching settings by offering critical reflections and suggestions for practice from an early career academic that specialises in academic literacies. Key concepts explored include developing co-teaching norms and pedagogies through a community of practice, establishing two-way dialogue, diversifying strengths of teaching teams, and enforcing continual reflection and feedback. The paper also provides contextualised guidance notes, so that university educators and program managers have a clearer direction as to how co-teaching teams could be implemented across a range of higher education teaching programs.

Introduction and context

Co-teaching has been regularly used as a pedagogical tool in K-12 and postsecondary learning environments for decades, yet its practice in higher education institutions has only recently started to grow in popularity. Defined as 'two instructors who team teach by providing simultaneous instruction to a large group of students in a course over a period of time', co-teaching has been well documented

to offer students greater staff support, alternative perspectives on course material, and exposure to different teaching styles (Lock et al., 2016, p. 24; Lock, Rainsbury, Clancy, Rosenau, & Ferriera, 2018; Pratt, 2014; Hang & Rabren, 2009). In my experience, benefits of co-teaching also extend to teaching staff, including opportunities to learn from other instructors, mentor new academics, and share workloads. The effectiveness of a co-teaching delivery style relies on mutual respect and appreciation for varied teaching and learning strategies. To that end, the current literature has outlined several key principles to achieve a well-functioning co-teaching teams; these include establishing a shared commitment to mutual respect, ensuring that communication is regular and constructive, recognising colleagues' diverse strengths and expertise, and maintaining an open mind when thinking about ideas that could improve student outcomes (Lock et al., 2018; Morelock et al., 2017; Lock et al., 2016; Wolffensperger & Patkin, 2013).

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As an early career academic who has taught in an Australian higher education institution that uses co-teaching methods, I have found that these principles generally reflect my own positive experiences of simultaneously teaching with a colleague. They are also emblematic of a strong pedagogic approach with regards to teaching and learning in a higher education environment. However, methods for how some of these principles can be achieved needs greater clarity as well as stronger evidence that they work well in practice. Student feedback can provide some useful indications into the impact of co-teaching on the learning experience, yet reflections from those that teach in these teams also offers important insights that can inform best practice.

This paper builds upon recent models and explores four important concepts that I have observed as key elements of high-quality tertiary co-teaching pedagogy as an early career academic that specialises in academic literacies (presented in Figure 1). Each concept is interrelated and relies on the general assumption that co-teachers act respectfully when it comes to communicating with one another and discussing areas for improvement. For each concept, this paper includes reflections from my own teaching context and guidance notes for practice, so that university educators and program managers have a clearer direction as to how co-teaching could be implemented across a range of higher education teaching programs.

These reflections and guidance notes were written based on experiences from co-teaching as an academic literacy specialist in first-year undergraduate units at Charles Darwin University (CDU), a regional Australian university based in the Northern Territory that enrols a high number of diverse learners. These learners include those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, first-in-family to study at university, mature age students, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The first-year units taught are part of a program titled 'Common Units', which aim to build academic communication skills as well as content knowledge in the fields of sustainability, cultural studies and design. In this arrangement, I partnered with a discipline specialist as we jointly delivered classes internally on campus. Framed in this light, the concepts explored in this paper put these diverse student needs first but also to demonstrate how diverse teaching teams can learn from one another.

Figure 1: Key concepts for effective co-teaching in higher education
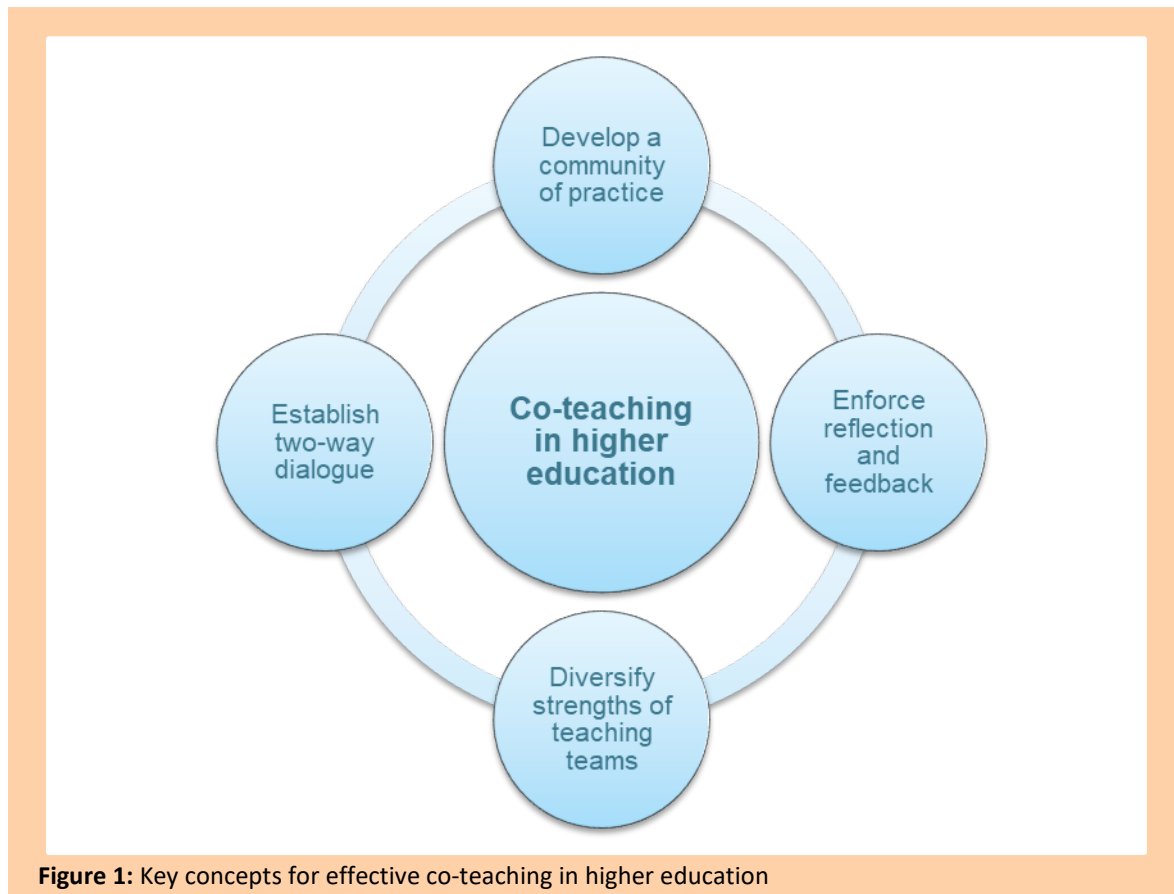
Develop co-teaching norms and pedagogies through a community of practice

Building a model for quality co-teaching is a complicated process. Each teacher brings their own pedagogic approaches and personalities to a shared teaching environment, and as such, managing the dynamics between a teaching team requires regular communication and negotiation to provide the best learning experience for their respective students. It can also produce quickly changing situations in a classroom. Co-teachers share the control of the learning environment, and even with extensive preparation, unexpected actions from a fellow co-teacher can prompt oneself to respond while 'thinking on one's feet'.

Establishing a community of practice (CoP) around teaching with colleagues is an important step in addressing these challenges. First coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in the early 1990s, CoP in its simplest form refers to a process in which groups participate in collective learning in a shared domain (Pyrko et al., 2016; Wenger, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In a higher education context, CoP with respect to co-teaching involves a mutual commitment to producing the best outcomes for students and creating a stimulating yet respectful work environment for university teaching staff. CoP as a concept, however, remains somewhat loosely defined; shared knowledge and norms can be developed either explicitly set out through clear rules and guidelines or more tacitly through informal conversations (Li et al., 2009). These two approaches can be amalgamized: formal workshops and teaching guides offer a solid foundation for best practice in any teaching context, and informal discussions with colleagues about specific instances or challenges can give a greater sense of belonging within the team as well for preparation for handling difficult situations.

To this end, the CDU Common Units co-teaching team regularly delivers workshops and training sessions, shares teaching experiences, and discusses issues relating to teaching delivery. These initiatives help to tacitly reaffirm a mutual interest in student-centred learning. Of course, these activities need not be limited to an individual co-teaching team. Instead, all co-teachers that teach across the same program can share knowledge and experience through forums such as online discussion boards or pre-semester development workshops. This establishes norms when co-teaching and how to deal with unexpected situations through input from other colleagues. For early career academics, having a CoP specifically for co-teaching assists the transition into this form of teaching delivery and provides a way in which new ideas can be shared regardless of years of teaching experience.

Reflections and guidance notes for practice

- ❖ Develop and deliver a pre-teaching workshop that explores the benefits and challenges associated with co-teaching in a higher education context. This helps new co-teachers understand the expectations before beginning the teaching period, and provides an opportunity for experienced co-teachers to continue to reflect on their practice. I personally found this type of workshop extremely helpful when first working in a co-teaching context, particularly because it was guided by senior academics who shared past experiences and common challenges. It was also an important networking opportunity. Through these workshops I met all academics working in the Common Units team; not just those with which I would be teaching.
- ❖ For online teaching models, use a discussion board to provide clear guidance about sharing a classroom with another teacher as well as how to reduce feelings of isolation when teaching in a web-based program. Discussion boards can also be useful as a forum for written reviews of development workshops, frequently asked questions, and discussions between co-teachers working on multiple campuses. When I faced difficult situations with students, it was helpful having an online space to share my experiences only accessible to staff and receive support from other teachers. In one case I had another academic assist with an email draft to a student who was facing difficult personal challenges that were affecting their ability to study. Feedback through a private staff forum provided important support for managing this challenging student interaction.

Establish two-way dialogue

Open and honest communication is a deep-rooted principle of quality co-teaching. In this context, establishing a two-way dialogue refers to two important communication channels: those between co-teachers and those between teaching teams and unit or course coordinators. At a unit or course level, it is important that coordinators create a communication plan early in a teaching session, outline expectations regarding communication between teaching teams, and reinforce the idea that co-teaching is a 'we, not me' process (Lock et al., 2016, p. 31).

Within individual teaching teams, it should be primarily the responsibility of the more experienced academic to first guide discussions and invite the other co-teacher to freely express their ideas or opinions (as experienced academics are usually paired with early career academics in the Common Units program). For instance, I felt more comfortable voicing my opinions on what did or did not work well and why after delivering a class when a more experienced instructor explicitly says that they would welcome constructive feedback and suggestions. Occasionally I did succumb to 'imposter

syndrome', a common condition for early career academics in which I may underestimate my intellectual capabilities or feel that it is not my place to provide constructive feedback to more experienced academics despite possessing the credentials to teach effectively as an equal partner (Bannatyne, 2015). As a result, senior academics have a responsibility to allay these concerns by leading initial discussions and opening themselves up to constructive comments about how joint teaching practice could improve teaching pedagogy and ultimately student learning.

Reflections and guidance notes for practice

- ❖ Program or course leaders should explicitly encourage experienced academics to take on a mentorship role for new staff.
- ❖ At the start of a teaching period, co-teachers should discuss whether they feel comfortable interjecting or instead prefer inviting the other co-teacher to speak at the end of a section of the class to add additional content. Establishing these expectations early avoids co-teachers feeling offended or annoyed by a co-teacher interrupting while the other is speaking. These conversations made it easier when I worked with more than one co-teacher, so I understood each academic's individual preferences before classes began.
- ❖ Develop an expectation that each co-teacher reviews each class immediately after its delivery, including a brief discussion of what went well and what could be improved. Any significant comments or feedback can be recorded and then reviewed by the broader team at the end of the teaching period. I found this practice particularly useful, as I often struggled to remember all important issues throughout a semester unless they were written in a journal or discussion board. It also provided a good opportunity to exchange constructive feedback with fellow co-teachers immediately after a session, so that any issues could be addressed for future classes.

Diversify strengths of teaching teams

Another key co-teaching principle is to diversify the strengths of a teaching team, such as one with expertise in content knowledge and the other with expertise in academic literacies. This has an obvious benefit for students, as they are exposed to different perspectives and a greater breath of knowledge. In other words, delivering content through a co-teaching team with diverse knowledge and experience can offer greater support to students with varied learning needs (Solberg, 2017). An additional benefit is that having expertise in one field gives early career academics a greater sense of authority and confidence to share ideas relating to their respective subject area. As an academic literacies specialist, this approach increased my confidence to make suggestions relating to my field of expertise such as embedding literacy-based activities into class material and assessment items.
In the CDU context, a useful aspect that has worked well for larger cohorts with multiple classes is to pair new instructors with experienced instructors at the start of a teaching week, and then those new instructors can co-teach with other less experienced instructors later in the same week. This helps new academics to familiarise themselves with course content and delivery from an experienced academic, observe different teaching styles, as well as develop professionally through providing guidance to other co-teachers.

Reflections and guidance notes for practice

- ❖ Wherever possible, pair co-teachers with varied teaching and research backgrounds. Through working in a diverse team, I learned a range of interesting teaching techniques and developed

my content knowledge of the respective disciplines of my co-teachers.

❖ A senior-junior teaching team should deliver a class near the start of a teaching week, so that the junior co-teacher is better equipped to partner another junior co-teacher for another class later in the same week. Through this method, I found myself a little more reserved in the first class but much more confident and prepared by the second class.

Enforce reflection and feedback

Continually reflecting on the positive and challenging aspects of a teaching session is an important practice regardless of whether classes have been delivered individually or in a team (Harvey, Coulson & McMaugh, 2016). In a co-teaching environment, however, providing regular feedback to one another in a constructive manner is particularly essential. A common practice within a co-teaching team is to discuss briefly what worked well and what could be improved upon after each class. Coordinators and managers should also establish processes in which teaching teams can share feedback with the wider teaching team or academic department. This can take several forms, such as weekly face-to-face meetings, online discussion forum comments, and end of semester reviews. Smaller suggestions can be raised in weekly meetings, whereas broader suggestions regarding the curriculum or assessment can be recorded for end of semester reviews. In either case, keeping a written record of thoughts and comments is critical.

A final consideration is reviewing student feedback on their experiences of being taught by co-teachers. Student views can provide insightful perspectives whether classes were delivered effectively and if they contributed to their learning. In surveys, students should be asked to comment specifically on whether they found co-teaching to be a beneficial experience and list reasons why or why not. Instructors might also look for opportunities to ask for informal feedback from students after class where appropriate. I have observed this method of open and candid discussions with students quite helpful when reflecting on the effectiveness of a teaching session.

That said, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of student feedback. In most cases, tertiary students may not have a complete appreciation for the importance of some course learning outcomes or the reasoning behind teaching and learning decisions (such as the pedagogical underpinnings of co-teaching). As such, students can be limited in their ability to comment meaningfully on the effectiveness of such programs and initiatives. For informal face to face discussions, they might also be less forthcoming in their comments due to concerns of embarrassment or confrontation. Additional aspects to consider include bias in student evaluations, such as those relating to gender (MacNell, Driscoll & Hunt, 2015). Other studies go further than examining bias and conclude that there is no significant correlation between student evaluations and teaching effectiveness (Uttl, White & Gonzalez, 2017). To that end, recognising the limitations of student evaluations is just as important as the results of the evaluations themselves.

Reflections and guidance notes for practice

❖ At the start of a teaching period, co-teachers should discuss their preferred method of communication and expectations regarding feedback. For example, I have worked with some

colleagues who prefer an email debrief after a class, and others who like to discuss feedback on classes face-to-face after a session.

❖ Include a student evaluation question that comments on whether co-teaching assisted in student learning during the course or unit (including the reasons why or why not), but acknowledge the limitations of what can be drawn from the results.

Conclusion

While these concepts, reflections and guidance notes are by no means exhaustive and might not neatly fit within all teaching programs, they provide at least some further elaboration on the key strategies that can be employed to ensure high quality co-teaching in a higher education environment. They also aim to mitigate any potential personality or power clashes between teaching teams, particularly those that include co-teachers from diverse backgrounds or at different stages of their career. As an early career academic, these approaches have been useful in my academic development as a university educator. I encourage other institutions to consider these notes in developing their respective co-teaching programs.

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