



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Playing Well Together: The Challenges and Rewards of Team Teaching

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Many instructors recognize the value of collaborative teaching: by sharing different yet complementary expertise and building upon one another's intellectual strengths, teachers engage in dialogues that creatively and critically intersect to produce new and deeper knowledge. Team teaching helps students explore alternative approaches, without the course devolving into a proliferation of unrelated points of view. By combining and integrating the viewpoints of multiple instructors, team teaching encourages participants to synthesize materials into a broader conceptual framework. Consequently, students and teachers alike can reach more profound conclusions about the whole, while simultaneously enhancing their understanding of the specific topics under investigation.

However, many of us also understand that planning and carrying out a team-taught course can be challenging. On Friday, April 4, 2003, a distinguished group of University instructors addressed these challenges in "Teaching In Teams," a panel discussion jointly sponsored by the Teaching Resource Center and the National Endowment for the Humanities Horace W. Goldsmith Distinguished Teaching Professorship. Participants included James Childress, Edwin B. Kyle Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Institute for Practical Ethics; Michael Smith, Thomas C. Sorensen Professor of Political and Social Thought and Associate Professor of Politics; Irene Oh, Ph.D. candidate and instructor in

Religious Studies; Barbara Wixom and Adelaide Wilcox King, Assistant Professors of Commerce.

Childress and Smith shared the stage in "Twenty-First Century Choices: War, Justice, and Human Rights," a Fall 2002 cross-listed course in History, Politics and Religious Studies, funded by the College "Topical Common Courses" program. Childress and Smith discussed their experiences in this course as well as in several other courses they have team taught with other faculty members across the University. They both favor highly collaborative team-teaching models, where two or more faculty members consistently intermingle their teaching activities throughout the semester, often sharing instructional duties within each class period. Childress and Smith prefer that approach to serialized team teaching, in which different instructors are solely responsible for a specific segment of the course. Their experiences indicate that the joint preparation and collaborative lecturing that team teaching entails enhances its educational value, especially from a cross-disciplinary perspective. Smith discussed the advantages of providing students with differing, yet compatible, teaching models and varied perspectives on a topic, and Childress pointed out that a successful team-taught course ought ultimately to offer an integrated and coherent approach rather than a mere aggregation of individual faculty perspectives.

Focusing on a TA's experience with team teaching, Irene Oh discussed how student interaction with different members of a teaching team may vary in both content and degree, depending on numerous factors, including the instructors' ages and genders. Oh discussed how these differences can be utilized to inspire productive and consistent student participation and enhance diversity of approaches. She reflected on her own experience as the co-

teacher, with Michael Smith, of a Political and Social Thought third-year seminar. Oh identified some of the challenges and rewards of sharing equal responsibilities with Smith in designing the course. For example, Oh argued that collaborating in selecting course materials allowed her to include favorite and well-known texts but also challenged her to master the texts that Smith had selected. Cooperation in leading and facilitating seminar discussions required extensive and communal preparation, but the quality of active student involvement was greatly enhanced as a result. Similarly, Oh felt that the time she and Smith dedicated to devising consistent evaluation styles and ranking methods for papers and exams was well spent, as it allowed them to provide students with extensive and detailed commentary on their work. She also illustrated activities that proved to be especially rewarding within a team-taught format, such as class debates in which each team member separately coaches a different group of students before they engage together in the debating exercise.

Integration is, according to Barbara Wixom and Adelaide Wilcox King, the key to successful team teaching. King and Wixom team teach “Strategy and Systems,” a McIntire core course that is part of the “Integrated Core Experience” (ICE), a two-semester program for entering Commerce School students. Each semester, teams of faculty members representing different subject areas in the Commerce School team teach three consecutive sessions. Wixom and King explained that integration works on multiple levels: within each team, within different teams in the same field, and also across interdisciplinary teams. By presenting course materials in an interdisciplinary manner, faculty teams highlight how different subject areas relate to one another, avoid redundancy, and increase consistency. By coaching and modeling collaborative practices, faculty teams prepare students for real-world working situations, and help them develop comparative and analytical skills.

While designing and implementing team-taught courses is a time-consuming enterprise, the panelists agreed that team-teaching achieves goals that could not be achieved by working alone. Efficient planning, mutual trust, careful coordination, intellectual compatibility, and willingness to reassess one’s own intellectual presuppositions were some of the elements that panel discussants considered essential for the success of a team-taught course. Panel discussants concluded that team teaching is an ideal pedagogical tool to encourage students to shift interest from mastering one method of inquiry to developing the critical perspective necessary to exploit and evaluate several cognitive methods.

A videotape of the “Teaching in Teams” workshop is available for perusal at the Teaching Resource Center.