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Team Teaching via Video Conferencing: Practical Strategies for Course Design and Delivery

Camp and Egbert

Abstract

This article provides a theoretically grounded how-to guide for collaborative design and implementation of team teaching in a distance education (IVC) context, including practical strategies for effective planning, preparation, curriculum- and technology-related issues; dynamics inherent in real-time course delivery; and incorporating a self-reflective process for ongoing evaluation and course improvement – qualitative data representing student perceptions and experiences of team taught distance education are provided, as well as ongoing efforts regarding evaluation in this area.

Team Teaching via Video Conferencing: Practical Strategies for Course Design and Delivery

"Loved the Team-teaching approach, with each instructor able to express and capitalize on their individual areas of strength"
- Student Course Evaluation comment

Neither of us ever experienced team teaching as students. We were always taught by solo professors. We were mentored and trained to teach alone. Then we both accepted faculty positions at Utah State University in a brand-new graduate social work program that reaches every corner of the state of Utah and delivers instruction primarily via interactive video conferencing (IVC). We were assigned offices at far flung regional sites miles away from one another and any other social work faculty colleagues. We were asked to teach across a curriculum in areas in which we felt strong—and areas in which we did not—and to deliver instruction alone to a scattered group of mostly commuter students who arrived after a full workday and were expected to sit through 6 hours of class every Tuesday night. While both of us were experienced teachers from prior university settings, this combination of factors presented a new and challenging "perfect storm" for potential disaster in terms of our ability to keep students (as well as ourselves) engaged, connected, and entertained. Thus, we embarked on a team teaching journey motivated more by desperation than inspiration.

Our field, social work, is both a practice-based profession as well as an academic discipline, and it is underpinned by theories from the social sciences, humanities, and cultural studies. The profession engages people, communities, and institutions to address human challenges and enhance universal well-being. Helping students to develop these professional competencies and requisite interpersonal interaction skills is the primary goal of social work education. From our perspective, as professional social workers and professional educators, team teaching makes us better instructors and increases the impact we have in the classroom. Along with modeling collaboration and professionalism, team teaching in the distance education context reduces isolation, improves engagement, and mitigates technology-related anxiety for both students and faculty (Bettencourt & Weldon, 2011). Although these concepts are particularly relevant to social work and other human service-based disciplines, they are important considerations in any educational realm in which instruction is delivered via IVC.

Blanchard (2012) described "the vision of an individual professor lecturing in front of a classroom full of attentive students [as] so iconic that it is hardly ever questioned. Such a vision is not only a product of our own experiences as students, but is reinforced by popular media images of bearded, tweed-clad, white men that [sic] bombard our collective subconscious" (p. 338). The gap between this "sage on the stage" expectation and the distance delivery reality is both profound and pervasive. Team teaching has been recognized as an effective

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strategy to bridge this gap, and numerous researchers have noted significant advantages in team teaching as compared to courses taught by individual instructors, including:

- The ability to reach greater numbers of students, particularly those in rural areas and diverse geographical regions (Collins, Hemmeter, Schuster, & Stevens, 1996).
- Greater workload management with regard to course design and development, ongoing course management, and evaluation (Collins et al., 1996; Eisen & Tisdell, 2000; Harris & Harvey, 2000).
- Modeling professional collaboration and problem-solving (Eisen & Tidsell, 2000; Laughlin, Nelson, & Donaldson, 2011).
- Increased student exposure to differing points of view and areas of instructor expertise (Collins et al, 1996; Harris & Harvey, 2000; Pliner, Iuzzini, & Banks, 2011).
- Enhanced faculty development and increased support for pedagogical decision-making (Pliner et al., 2011).

Furthermore, researchers have identified multiple models of team teaching relevant to distance learning (Collins et al., 1996), including:

- The Lead and Supplemental Instructors Model, wherein one instructor assumes responsibility with the supplemental instructor providing support and back-up.
- The Multiple Instructor Model, an approach in which each instructor assumes full responsibility for specific portions of the course.
- The Guest Lecturer Model, which utilizes a primary instructor plus supplemental guest speakers.
- The Co-Instructor Model, which employs two instructors who share all responsibilities for all aspects of the course.

Although we have used all four of these models in our approach to collaborative teaching, we have chosen to focus on the Co-Instructor Model. We have found this to be the most impactful for students, as well as the most manageable and equitable with regard to instructor workload.

The context in which we employed this model is a graduate social work program delivered to seven instructional sites via IVC. We chose the co-instruction model in order to mitigate the barriers to knowledge delivery and skill development inherent in distance education. We believe this model is generalizable and germane to an array of professional education, and this chapter provides a how-to guide for designing and implementing a team-taught course in the distance education (IVC) environment. In it, we present practical strategies for effective planning and preparation, responding to curriculum-related issues, addressing and managing dynamics inherent in real-time course delivery, developing professional use of self, creating a productive classroom climate, and incorporating a self-reflective process of ongoing evaluation and course improvement.

Planning and Preparation

Engaging in close collaboration and course preparation with a teaching partner allows each instructor to learn from his or her colleague's content and teaching style. We have found that sharing course delivery with another instructor can foster a sense of competence and self-efficacy, in that the combination of individual areas of strength and weakness can carry each instructor through moments of awkwardness and self-doubt. For example, when a student asks that inevitable question that catches the presently lecturing instructor off-guard, two things may occur: (a) Author 2, the "stumped" professor, appears simultaneously thoughtful and collegial by inquiring, "Author 1, what are your thoughts on that?" or (b) Author 1 proactively (but subtly) "rescues" Author 2 by interjecting his own answer to the student. Obviously, such attempts to help could be at best distracting and at worst dangerous to the co-instructor relationship without trust, insight into our own and each other's areas of competence, and an appropriate lack of ego. After all, in most cases two brains are thought to be better than one—we have had multiple experiences wherein teaching as a team has allowed us to appear twice as brilliant as we would otherwise. Between the two of us we have

over 50 years of experience as social work practitioners, as well as 28 years of higher education teaching experience. The depth and breadth of our academic and clinical practice know-how provides our students with a greater array of knowledge and examples of real-world application than could normally be embodied in a single professor. In the classroom, we are able to access and cite one another's experience to provide an increased diversity of illustrations that make concepts more real and generalizable to the various practice areas in which students are interested.

To maximize the benefits of team teaching, it is imperative that both instructors invest in careful planning prior to course delivery and systematic preparation for each class session. Intentional division of labor is critical to successful delivery of the course from start to finish. Team teaching is most efficient when there is a clear understanding and consensus with regard to individual roles and responsibilities in teaching, student communication, and management of course business. Critical elements on which to collaborate include course learning objectives, assignments, online learning management systems, course schedules and calendars, and course delivery team interfaces.

- *Reach consensus on course learning objectives and design instructional methods to increase student attainment of desired competencies.* Our course objectives are informed by the University's formal course evaluation protocol (IDEA), the Council on Social Work Education's required academic and practice competencies, and our agreed-upon ideas. We individually explore textbooks, readings, and resources related to the specific content each of us will be leading; we then arrive at a consensus on what elements will be selected.
- *Develop competency-building course assignments and identify a Lead Instructor for each.* For example, a required competency for a course we team teach on administration and leadership in social work states that students will "analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice" (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015). Based on Author 1's expertise in agency administration and policy writing, we agreed he would design and lead this portion of the course and coordinate and grade related assignments. The same course included a competency that required students to identify and access resources to serve client needs. Author 2 used her experience to design, lead, and grade a section of the course devoted to documentation of need and writing grant proposals.
- *Work together to organize online learning management system elements*. Based on interest and specific skills, Author 2 contributes to our online course interface (USU uses Canvas) by uploading readings and resources and creating platforms for student communication and weekly homework assignments. Author 1 formats the various structural elements of the site (site map, links, assignment tabs, etc.) and focuses on making the interface visually appealing and user-friendly.
- *Create a course schedule and calendar that clearly designate each instructor's responsibilities for all course sessions*. This area of precourse planning and preparation must be done collaboratively. We typically use a 5-week module format divided into three topical areas related to course objectives. We teach the first module (Administration and Leadership Skills) together, with equally shared responsibility for course sessions, assignments, and grading. The remaining two modules (Policy Development and Grant Writing) feature a single lead instructor, with the co-instructor in a more supportive role. This includes having the lead instructor conduct course sessions, grade assignments, and respond to related communication with students. This approach allows for each of us to have our "moment of glory" showcasing the passion we have for our own areas of interest while simultaneously modeling collaboration and mutual respect (Henning Loeb, 2016).
- *Communicate clearly with technology facilitators, administrators, teaching*

assistants, and other relevant parties to your course delivery team. We originate from two different sites, each with face-to-face students, and our cyber-classroom includes five additional receiving sites. This introduces a lot of players into the course delivery equation (site managers, technology facilitators, administration, classroom aides, etc.). Assuming that all of these individuals will somehow magically anticipate expectations is simply asking for trouble. Any schedule changes, format adjustments, or special media considerations must be communicated well in advance in order to insure smooth delivery. During one team teaching iteration, we elected to originate from different sites each week throughout the semester in order to facilitate better connections with students. Recognizing the potential disaster this travel could create, we developed a semester-long calendar designating where in the state each of us would be on any given week. We emailed this schedule to basically everyone who could potentially be impacted by our travel, which resulted in a smooth semester.

(It is worth noting that although students at our rural sites loved this "rotating instructor" approach—and greeted us with potluck dinners—by the end of the semester we were travel-worn, exhausted, committed to being somewhat less self-sacrificing in the future, and in need of new car tires.)

The precourse planning process should be underway well before the course begins, and then again—more comprehensively and task-focused—shortly before the course commences. Prior to each class session, it is also vitally important to schedule team consultation and collaboration as close to actual class delivery as possible. This promotes entering class fresh with energy and your team-teaching plan foremost in your thoughts. We recommend the following as part of the planning sessions prior to each class meeting.

- *Identify learning objectives and student competencies for the class session*. For example, competencies for one class session included managing employees and supervising staff; recruiting, developing, and retaining staff; and the multiple roles of a social work supervisor.
- *Discuss specific content, learning activities, and strategies to engage students at all sites, with a particular focus on students who do not have a face-to-face instructor*. Focused on the competencies described above, we created a site-based small group discussion activity based on leadership and administration case studies. Students at each site prepared a response and presented to the entire seven-site cohort.
- *Decide which instructor will take the lead on each segment of class*. For one course session, Author 1 created the case studies and associated questions, and Author 2 facilitated the site-to-site discussion (at times akin to herding cats).
- *Create a session-to-session flow by planning for follow-up from previous sessions as a bridge to future material*. We plan time at the beginning of each class to connect material discussed from the previous week to the competencies being addressed in the current session and entertain follow-up questions from students. For example, in one session we discussed a framework for various styles of leadership and supervision, and the effectiveness of each in different work contexts. As we began the next session, we invited students to share examples of the styles of leadership they had observed during the week in their employment and internship settings. As a bridge to the content of the present session, we asked students to explore and identify characteristics of the leadership style that were most congruent with their personal approach to administration.
- *Consider class timing and time-management issues while creating a flexible session agenda*. Our philosophy is to over-prepare and potentially under-deliver rather than running out of things to say. Following this principle, we always have an "if we have time" learning activity for each session so that we are never left empty-handed. Thus far, this strategy has never failed us. For

example, as a backup plan we prepared media clips and discussion questions that were specific to the session's content on leadership styles. As we worked through the session, we only had time to use one of the several media clips, therefore we posted the remaining clips on Canvas so students could access them outside of class.

- *Problem-solve for potential technological and other barriers to accomplishing class session goals.* We have learned from sad experience that media and technology can never be fully trusted. We therefore always have a multilevel back-up plan, the most effective of which is emailing all course session material (including presentation materials, discussion questions, PowerPoints, links to media, etc.) to one another prior to class. For example, during one course session the video we had chosen to show had no sound when originated from Author 2's site. Since Author 1 had prepared to access to the video clip, he was able to run it from his site with virtually no loss of class time.

When it comes to planning individual class sessions, it is essential to be intentional in the division of labor. Team teaching is most effective when instructors are equally yoked and each individual's strengths are illuminated (e.g., Author 1 is talented at creating engaging PowerPoint presentations, while Author 2 has considerable expertise in facilitating multi-site discussions—an impactful combination).

"I loved the team teaching aspect. I was able to see clarification on items and see two different sides of a story."
—Student Course Evaluation comments

Real-Time Course Delivery

As important as precourse planning and preparation are, they will only get you so far without a solid plan firmly in hand to facilitate successful real-time course delivery. Zapf, Jerome, and Williams (2011) cited several "performance metaphors" that have been used to describe team teaching. Beavers and DeTurck (2000) described the process as "a semester-long jam session, where musicians who share a deep love for the material they play decide to explore its possibilities with little regard for the dangers" (p. 1). Team teaching has also been described as dancing with a "you lead, I'll follow" theme, as well as sharing the characteristics of a high-wire act with its "I'll start and we'll see what happens" impromptu dynamic (University of Western Ontario, 2002). In the classroom, we have experienced fantastic "jam sessions" and well-choreographed dance performances, along with unfortunate high wire mishaps (thank goodness there were safety nets so we lived to teach again). These adventures have convinced us of the importance of an intentional approach to attending to all elements of real-time course delivery. To this end, we believe expecting the unexpected and trusting in one another's competence are of paramount importance.

- *Expect the unexpected.* Having a flexible class agenda is beneficial if technology or other issues deter you from your specific plan. This allows you to shift to other session elements while awaiting and/or hoping for resolution of the problem. For example, if one instructor experiences unexpected technological difficulties, the other instructor can take over with virtually no loss of class time or instructional quality. To illustrate, during one session Author 1 repeatedly "techno-froze" mid-sentence and Author 2 was able to carry the torch until he "thawed." On another occasion, Author 2 was rendered "microphone-mute" for unknown reasons, and Author 1 took over the verbal communication—making us feel that a background in American Sign Language would have been useful.
- *Trust in the competence of your colleague.* Proper preparation and a strengths-based division of labor fosters a sense of trust, strengthens your foundation of collaboration, and enhances your ability to facilitate student engagement and effective learning across the miles. Having faith in your teaching partner's ability to "carry on" in your unplanned

technological absence promotes a sense of confidence in knowing there are options available in the event of uncontrollable glitches or other difficulties. (Trusting in your students' desires to care and engage in their own learning is another vital element of successful real-time course delivery.)

Professional Use of Self

In the field of professional social work, the concept of use of self is employed to describe the social worker's authentic application of his or her personal qualities, belief systems, and life experiences to his or her work with others (Baldwin, 2000; Edwards & Bess, 1998). We find this notion to be highly relevant to teaching, as well. Walters (2008) stated:

One of the most important aspects you bring to teaching is your personality. Although fundamental to teaching, the teacher's theoretical orientation and mastery of skills appear to have the least impact on student satisfaction when compared to the social worker's authenticity and how they use personality traits as a therapeutic tool. What is important regarding authenticity is to reflect your real self at all times. (p. 1)

Specific attention to use of self is essential to effective real-time course delivery. One fundamental element we tune into is Video Conference "Personality"—the manner in which you present yourself on-screen. "Personality" is defined as "the set of emotional qualities, ways of behaving, etc., that makes a person different from other people," including the "attractive qualities (such as energy, friendliness, and humor) that make a person interesting or pleasant to be with" (Merriam-Webster, 2016). This definition supports the use of self approach, and we have found that "energy, friendliness, and humor," as well as genuine enthusiasm and passion for your topic, travel well across the miles.

Another important consideration regarding use of self is that of mindfulness regarding non-verbal communication and body language. Drawing again from our social work experience, we understand the majority of human communication is non-verbal and are aware that factors such as posture, facial expression, eye contact, and body positioning communicate interest and engagement to your audience (Cornoyer, 2014; Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010; Kadushin & Kadushin, 2013).

- *Eye contact*. In order to appear as if you are making eye contact with your audience, you need to look directly into the camera. In some IVC settings, this may create an awkwardness, as cameras may be positioned divergent from your video screen. Further, in mixed settings with face-to-face and distance students, it may be helpful to explain to students in the room that you are not ignoring them when attempting to simulate eye contact with their distance peers (Love, 2013).
- *Awareness and intention with regard to self-presentation.* Professional presentation and dress in a video conference context should be attended to as much or more than a face-to-face session, as it can be more challenging to convey a favorable impression. Students are tuned in to the "big screen factor" of IVC course delivery. For example, Author 2 was interrupted by a group of students 300 miles away who had decided "you look and talk just like Hilary Swank." Similarly, Author 1 was designated as a doppelganger for Chef Gordon Ramsey—"although he doesn't act like him."

Classroom Climate

Team teaching makes maintaining an upbeat and engaging classroom climate significantly less stressful and more manageable, even with large numbers of students and sites. When we teach together, our focus is on keeping the environment positive, challenging, and enjoyable. Our goal is for students to walk out of class thinking critically and with concrete ideas and strategies about the topic's application and implications. In social work, we address difficult issues that can be challenging for students both professionally and personally, as there is sometimes dissonance between the values of the social work profession and the value system of the individual student.

Navigating these complexities necessitates working with intention to create a classroom that explicitly defines professional expectations, ensures emotional safety, and facilitates instructor approachability.

- *Maintain a setting with professional expectations*. Freeman and Walsh (2013) stated, "Instructors should have strict guidelines for assignments and attendance, technology use, and classroom respect and civility" (p. 102). Accordingly, we establish clear ground rules for behavior, attendance, and student interaction. As an example, we tell students that our class is a professional commitment and if they are not able to attend this "appointment" to please let us know in advance. This is particularly relevant in a distance environment where many of our students commute, sometimes in the harsh weather conditions of a Utah winter. Through these expectations we communicate that we are genuinely concerned for students when they "no-show" for class.
- *Provide an emotionally safe and enlightening environment*. We intentionally model and emphasize mutual respect and an open exchange of ideas. The distance environment is often intimidating to students; having their comments broadcast to a host of their peers—that often cannot be seen—can contribute to student anxiety about speaking up or sharing their thoughts. Anticipating, attending to, and normalizing this dynamic empowers students to gain confidence and increase engagement. Some strategies for accomplishing this are actively inviting student participation in an intentional and systematic way, insuring equal time and attention are given to each site, and demonstrating patience for technologically-inherent time delays and student reticence in responding.

"The rotation from site to site gave everyone equal chance to share and comment on material was especially effective."
—Student Course Evaluation comment

- *Make yourself approachable to students through the use of appropriate humor (Freeman & Walsh, 2013) and self-disclosure*. Relationship-building in the IVC context requires increased time, attention, and proactive outreach to students; innocuous sharing of "things that make you you" (i.e., hobbies, interests, observations, etc.) demonstrates authenticity and provides channels for forming connections.

In summary, productive real-time course delivery depends upon flexibility, trust, professional use of self, maintaining a safe and productive classroom climate, and, most importantly, having a sense of adventure. IVC is generally a student participation inhibitor—through team teaching we are better able to foster student involvement and investment in the learning process. At the same time, we invest in our own learning process and professional development through systematic self-reflection and evaluation.

Ongoing Self-Reflection and Evaluation

Epstein and Hundert (2002) proposed that "professional competence is the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served" (p. 226). In the context of IVC team teaching, the merits of self-reflection and evaluation are obvious in their contribution to ongoing competence-building in effective course design, well-organized preparation, and engaging real-time delivery. We use student feedback obtained via mid-semester qualitative evaluations and end-of-semester mixed methods evaluations, in addition to peer evaluations conducted by mentors and instructors outside of our teaching team. Using in-course process evaluations as well as outcome data strengthens our ability to make course adjustments mid-stream as well as to prepare effectively for the next iteration of the course. With these concepts in mind, we systematically engage in several self-reflective

and evaluative practices.

- *Debrief as co-instructors as soon as possible after every class session*. This allows for in-depth evaluation of what went well, what could be improved, and what issues warrant following up.
- *While the energy is fresh, candidly critique our content, our delivery, and student responses.* We sometimes overtly communicate to students that we learned something from a previous class session and are implementing changes intended to improve the course. This models critical thinking, professional collaboration, and ongoing application of self-evaluation—key competencies of social work practice.
- *Solicit student feedback at periodic intervals*. We use a self-developed qualitative evaluation administered via our online learning management system mid-semester. Elements include asking students for feedback on their feelings about the format of the course (lectures, media, group projects, class discussions, etc.), texts and additional readings, their personal goals for the course, and questions and concerns they may have about successful completion.
- *Review overall course delivery and all evaluation components at the end of each semester.* This active appraisal of all course elements and associated outcomes allows us to incorporate lessons learned into future class sessions and future semesters.

We agree with Lester and Evans' (2009) assertion that "when we are willing to engage in reflective practice with those around us, listen to the thoughts and perspectives of others, even when there is inherent risk of conflict and disagreement, the opportunity to build greater understanding emerges...[and] we make space to build something bigger than we could have built ourselves" (pp. 380-381).

Conclusion

Eisen (2000) described team-teaching environments as "model learning communities that generate synergy through collaboration. Because the fruits of their efforts are often very visible and since team members' excitement is often contagious, they provide inspiration for others to engage in collaboration" (p. 12). Although there are challenges to delivering a team-taught course, we find the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The process of addressing and negotiating the difficulties adds to the value of the team teaching experience. Robinson and Schaible (1995) purported, "If we preach collaboration but practice in isolation … students get a confused message. Through learning to 'walk the talk,' we can reap the double advantage of improving our teaching as well as students' learning" (p. 59). As professional social workers and academics we do preach collaboration, we do not practice in isolation, and we have a responsibility to socialize our students in this model. While this is explicit in social work education, we believe this professional socialization is just as important in other disciplines.

We have experienced firsthand the isolation inherent in the distance learning environment. We have also found that when used strategically and with intention, team teaching within an IVC context contributes to student engagement and performance, and may reduce technology-related anxiety for students as well as instructors. It is true that we initially turned to team teaching as a survival strategy; however, as we have engaged with the model, immersed ourselves in the pedagogy, and observed the impact our efforts have had on our students, we become increasingly convinced that team teaching is the way to go. As stated by Tucker (2016), "Our connectivity to information and to one another makes this an incredibly exciting time to teach. Our collaborations are no longer limited to a school campus, and we no longer need to feel alone in our teaching practice" (p. 87).

The model of co-instruction we have detailed above provides a framework of practical

strategies for effective organization of curriculum and course structure, preparation for and management of real-time course delivery dynamics, awareness of professional use of self, maintenance of a safe and productive classroom climate, and implementation of a self-reflective process of ongoing evaluation and course improvement. Clearly this approach necessitates up-front energy and investment, ongoing intentional planning, and collaborative trust between co-instructors; however, we believe the payoff to be both pertinent and generalizable to an array of disciplines and student contexts. We have also discovered this makes future iterations of course planning less time intensive and course delivery more effective. Further, we have found use of the co-instruction model to be a worthwhile and rewarding endeavor with exponential influence far beyond anything we have experienced when teaching alone via IVC. In fact, after multiple iterations of this co-instructional model we have never had a single student complain about this approach—and we have received overwhelmingly positive feedback.

"Having two instructors brought greater perspective to the class."

"Team teaching rocks!"
– Student Course Evaluation comments

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