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Team Teaching on a Shoestring Budget

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INTRODUCTION

Team teaching is an established pedagogical practice, particularly in honors education. Many institutions have long traditions of combining the gifts of multiple faculty in one honors course. For schools that lack such a tradition, however, securing the institutional resources to support team teaching can be a daunting obstacle. If team teaching is really a part of “The New Model Education,” as Gary Bell argues (57), can it be done on a shoestring budget? The Rogers State University Honors Program began in the fall of 2005 with an extremely tight budget and no money for compensating faculty. Despite this challenge, we have experimented with a number of ways to implement team and collaborative teaching in honors courses. This essay will highlight the advantages and disadvantages of five different models for team teaching, none of which involves significant financial expense.

BACKGROUND

We decided to team teach because of our shared academic values and intellectual passions. Our discussions of literature, art, and philosophy enhanced our individual experiences, and we came to recognize the benefit of a shared classroom. Laura is Associate Professor of English at Rogers State University while Jim is Founding Director of the Honors Program as well as Associate Professor for Philosophy and Religious Studies. Each of us has also team taught with other professors and found those experiences rewarding as well.

Such collaboration is not without its obstacles. Questions of authority and credibility can be intertwined with preconceived ideas of gender and discipline in the classroom. Some students, especially incoming freshmen, perceive Jim’s additional role as director (the person ultimately in control of their scholarships) differently than Laura’s role as classroom professor. Consequently, some students consider Jim more powerful, at times more important, and at other times more threatening. Further, few students have experience in the academic areas of philosophy and religion prior to college while all have studied English for years (for better and worse). We have found that emphasizing our equal positions in the classroom and sharing in all class discussions and presentations, regardless of perceived academic area, alleviates some of these inherent

complications. Recognizing and dealing with student perceptions are essential for the successful team-teaching experience.

The value of team teaching is immense. Discussions of successful team-teaching experiences are common in the honors literature. John Zubizarreta recounts that, at the 2007 Teaching and Learning Fishbowl, students cited team-taught courses as one of their best learning experiences (114), a perception borne out by subsequent fishbowls as well. Kateryna Schray describes an intriguing bird-watching course that shows how multiple professors can facilitate the interdisciplinary nature of honors education. In such accounts, however, the funding for multiple faculty almost seems taken for granted. For instance, a group of faculty at Drake University teach “Paths to Knowledge,” an interdisciplinary course in which not only do all faculty members “receive a full course credit” but they also enjoy a “paid faculty summer workshop to prepare” (Vitha *et al.* 141). Such a situation is ideal, but the reality for many programs is that, in times of scarce resources, paying two or more faculty for teaching one course can be difficult to justify.

FIVE MODELS OF TEAM TEACHING

We have adopted five alternatives to full compensation, each of which is briefly described below, then discussed more fully, and finally summarized in the Appendix. The first model is the unpaid overload: one professor receives full credit for the course while a second donates his/her time to the course even though both are teaching equally. The second model is an extended series of guest lectures; while this model differs from full team teaching since one professor is always present and the other professors make one-time appearances, it can still be a worthwhile approach to collaboration. These first and second models are well-known approaches in use by many honors programs today. The third model is the “Shared Assignments” approach, which enables two or more faculty to share significant assignments between two courses and to team teach on selected readings, assignments, and topics, fully participating in each other’s classes on a limited basis. The fourth model (what we call “The Block Course”) is full team teaching, with two professors collaborating on teaching two courses in one combined format; each professor receives credit for teaching one class, but the two courses are integrated into one new block course. Finally, in the “Joint Meetings” model two or three courses meet together at regular intervals to discuss shared readings; by scheduling monthly or biweekly joint meetings, faculty create regular spaces for team teaching and student interaction across classes, enabling focused, specific team teaching without asking faculty to donate a full semester’s time. All five of these models are ways to implement team teaching when the financial resources for fully compensating faculty are unavailable, and they can serve as intermediate steps toward an ideal system.

THE UNPAID OVERLOAD

The traditional way to deal with financial constrictions is for one or more faculty to teach an unpaid overload. By donating their time for the full semester, faculty members who believe in team teaching can pioneer the practice at their institution. In *Beginning in Honors: A Handbook*, Samuel Schuman objects that “obviously, this situation should be avoided like the plague” (42). His reservations are understandable. Faculty who generously volunteer their time once may be expected or even required to do so again in the future. Unfortunately, this may be the only way to sustain some team-taught courses. Such is the case for Women in the Literary and Visual Arts, an interdisciplinary non-honors course at Rogers State. Together with Gary Moeller, the head of the Department of Fine Arts, Laura has taught this course since 2004. The first few times they alternated who was compensated and who donated their time; the past several years Laura has been paid to teach the course while Gary (as a department head with an already full teaching load) has volunteered.

From the beginning, Gary and Laura decided that both professors would participate fully in all classes, discussions, and projects. The course is a comparative study of women artists, both visual and literary. Gary grades the weekly visual analyses and Laura the weekly literary summaries while all major projects and final grading are done collaboratively. Having now taught the class five times, both professors are comfortable with the materials from both disciplines. Either one could easily teach the course alone and handle the content fully. Crucial to the course’s success, however, is the collaborative environment and presentation that team teaching facilitates.

Such a system has drawbacks, however. Unaccustomed to such a model, students often are concerned about who is “in charge” in the class because only one professor’s name is on the schedule and on their transcript. Gary and Laura address these concerns directly and early, then emphasizing their joint roles throughout the term. While specializations and fields are clear, both professors take part in all discussions, not just discussions within their own disciplines. The greatest obstacle, of course, is the burden to the unpaid faculty member, who must still carry a full teaching/administrative load. The course was first created with the idea that it would be a special topics course taught every two to three years, but now it is a required course for one major and one minor and has to be taught yearly. Figuring out how to sustain such a long-term commitment to team teaching with an unpaid overload remains a challenge since the teaching and service workload at an institution such as RSU is already quite demanding.

This institutionalization of the course highlights the danger of the unpaid overload, which can become an expected part of the professor’s schedule. With the advent of the honors program in 2005, Jim (as director) looked for ways to integrate team teaching without requiring one faculty member to donate a semester’s worth of teaching.

GUEST LECTURES

The second model for team teaching at Rogers State is incorporation of guest lectures. While guest lectures are a common enough practice, having a different professor lecture every week is more unusual. In the spring 2007 Honors Humanities II course, a total of fifteen other faculty members lectured in their area of expertise. The course met twice weekly for seventy-five minutes. The first session of each week saw a different professor teach on a chosen area of their favorite subject. A music history professor lectured on the history of rock and roll, a Spanish professor on the novels of Garcia Marquez, and a theatre scholar on the performance conventions of Shakespeare's time as background to understanding *Hamlet*. The second session of each week, the professor of record (Jim) led a discussion of the week's materials. The challenge with this model was integrating the various topics. While some of the lectures were excellent, faculty frequently tried to cover way too much material for the time available. The temptation to say everything that could be said (and possibly to make a favorable impression on some of the university's best students) often proved overwhelming.

The students in the course were quite positive about the experience, but as professor I often felt that the experiment was unsuccessful. One goal of the course was to expose honors freshmen and sophomores to a variety of disciplines and professors, to give them a sense of the myriad possibilities at the university. In that respect, the course was successful, but it was less successful in cultivating the kind of discussion, engagement, and critical thinking that honors courses normally inspire. While the guest lecture model can be a fascinating experience, synthesizing the views and expertise of fifteen other faculty members is difficult, and, although the course drew on the talents of many different teachers, it was not really a team-teaching experience as much as a succession of individual teachers contributing to the whole. For the method to work, the honors director or course professor needs to make clear to every professor the goals and rationale of the course and to plan carefully with all of them how their particular contribution will fit into the overall course.

SHARED ASSIGNMENTS

As we discussed our previous experiences with team teaching, we both knew that we wanted to do more with honors. In the spring of 2008, we decided to link our honors general education courses by sharing major assignments (a third model). Laura taught Honors Composition II while Jim taught Honors Humanities I. Students in both courses read Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and they wrote their major paper in Composition II about those texts. Each professor made several appearances in the other's classroom, participating in joint discussions. Two shorter papers for Humanities I went through a draft, peer review, and revision process in Composition II. The idea was to enable team teaching in the two courses without either professor having to donate a full semester to it.

This model had several advantages. The students' papers were much stronger than usual, showing a depth of critical thinking and a quality of writing uncommon for freshmen (even honors freshmen). Many of the students commented on how much they enjoyed the experience. The shared assignments made clear to them how essential writing is for all students and showed them that "writing across the disciplines" is more than a slogan. The linked courses also enabled us as professors to assign longer and more challenging readings than is typical for these courses. Students in Humanities I might normally read one of Homer's texts and selections from the other while students in Composition II typically would not read Homer at all.

The one big mistake we made was allowing a student to enroll in only one of the two linked courses. All students had been advised that they had to enroll in both courses, but, because no special designation was made in the official class schedule, it was difficult to refuse this student's demands to enroll in the composition course. While she said all the right things before the semester started, she was increasingly resistant to the heavy workload as the semester wore on. Her complaints became a real drain on the composition course in the second half of the semester. Especially in a course that is explicitly experimental, one negative student can have severe consequences for the entire class.

THE BLOCK COURSE

Having learned our lesson, we made the requirements as explicit as possible for the next iteration of linked courses. For spring 2009, we taught an extended block course (the fourth model). Laura was the professor of record for Honors Composition II, Jim was the professor for Honors Humanities II, but both professors (and all students) met for two hours three times a week. Both professors were fully involved in the course from planning stage to daily activities. We worked to integrate the course activities in order to avoid having separate "humanities time" and "composition time." The key to the block course is making it truly a hybrid of the two separate classes rather than just two courses that share a meeting time.

The block course was an incredibly rewarding experience for faculty and students alike. At its best, it was the kind of teaching experience one dreams about—students fully engaged, discussions exciting and unpredictable, a truly challenging course. The extended course session meant that topics could be fully covered. For instance, *Frankenstein* is a required text in all Comp II courses. Teaching this novel within the context of a humanities course rather than a stand-alone composition course, however, allowed us to connect the novel to other Romantic art, music, and poetry. While some attempt is made to contextualize Shelley's work in traditional composition classrooms, the students lack the time, ability, and perspective to engage fully in the ways we were afforded by the block course. The longer sessions also allowed for more creative activities, like competitive sonnet writing and academic bowls in which teams competed in painting recognition, and we were also able to tour a local museum.

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At the same time, the course was a bit of an endurance test. On an off-day, the two hours could really drag, particularly on days that students had tests or major assignments in their other classes. Sometimes the composition side of the course could seem neglected. Students did a tremendous amount of reading and writing, but they should have spent more time reflecting on their work and on the writing process in general. The normal practice in composition of producing multiple drafts, peer reviews, and revisions were all but lost to in-depth discussion and creative pursuits. Faculty members teaching a block course have to struggle to make the writing and revising process as explicit as possible and to emphasize the importance of these tasks.

This model presents the greatest benefits, but also the biggest challenges. Once again, one difficult student presented special problems for the team-taught course. While all students knew what was expected of them before they began the semester, as a captive population they did not have much choice. One student made it plain that this kind of challenge was not what he wanted out of honors. He withdrew from the two courses, from the honors program, and ultimately from the university. In some ways the more intensive environment of the block course accelerated the normal winnowing process of honors.

Another challenge is that, in effect, each professor was again teaching an overload. The workload was more than teaching an additional class because each of us had to master subjects outside our specialty. However, the rewards of the block course made it easier to do that extra work so that it did not feel like an overload. The block-course model would not be sustainable for the same faculty over a long period of time, but as an occasional experiment it is quite worthwhile.

JOINT MEETINGS

The fifth and final model for collaborative teaching is to hold joint meetings with our required interdisciplinary honors seminars. Each fall, one seminar is offered for each year's class (freshman, sophomore, and junior). The professor teaching the seminar determines the course's theme, assignments, and reading schedule. Once a month in the fall semesters of 2009 and 2010, all three seminars met together (approximately fifty students in all and three professors) while at least once more each month the freshmen and juniors met together. All three professors agreed on the monthly meetings (the final Thursday of each month). Laura taught the Junior Honors Seminar, Jim taught the Freshman Honors Seminar, and we both agreed to an additional joint meeting each month. In every case the students read common texts that were assigned with the joint sessions in mind. In one session the students were divided into teams, each of which was given a different set of essays on honors education (many of them drawn from *HIP* and *JNCHC*). The ensuing seminar saw the students critically reflecting on honors in their program, their goals for college, and the nature of education in general.

In many ways the joint meetings have turned out to be the most beneficial model, the one that we would most recommend to other honors programs. This model generated some of the engagement of the block course without faculty having to teach a semester's unpaid overload. It provided a great opportunity for the freshmen to get to know the older students. More importantly, it let the juniors model good discussion practices for the freshmen. While seniors can often be focused on capstone projects and post-graduation plans, in our experience juniors are usually more willing to devote their time to this sort of experimental course. The juniors were eager to show the freshmen (in the words of one junior) "what honors is all about." By the time they are juniors, students have seen successes and failures and have gained wisdom and perspective; they are also practiced in group discussions and creative thinking, hallmarks of such sessions. Most striking, however, is the appreciation they have gained for their experiences within their honors courses. As they move into their major classes, which seldom are honors, they comment on the disappointing lack of critical engagement by other students. Most show a wistful maturity and appreciation for the opportunities that have come to them through the honors program and share this with the freshmen. Late in the semester, the students worked together in teams drawn from all three classes (freshman, sophomore, and junior) so that their collaborative learning paralleled our collaborative teaching.

While we will continue to experiment with each of the five models in honors general education courses, the joint sessions of the annual honors seminars have become a permanent feature of our honors program. This model is easiest to use when the honors director is able to schedule multiple courses at the same time and has access to adequate facilities for a large group. We used the auditorium our first two years because all of the larger classroom spaces were unavailable. While non-traditional classroom spaces present challenges, they help students make a greater effort to participate. This kind of joint session can also be conducted outside of normal class hours if programs are not able to schedule the courses concurrently, but that option presents its own problems for scheduling. A monthly film series or book club presents similar opportunities if holding joint sessions in the classroom proves unworkable. For the true team-teaching experience, however, bringing separate classes together at regular intervals works best.

CONCLUSION

Having two or more professors from different disciplines on a teaching team reinforces the interdisciplinary nature of honors education. Multiple professors almost always produce multiple perspectives, enhancing the discussion and ensuring an ongoing conversation. Faculty members working together teach by example, modeling the sort of discussion, listening, and critical response practices that are at the heart of a great seminar. The ideal situation is full compensation for every faculty member, but that ideal is not always

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possible. The five models we have described provide possibilities for implementing team teaching when funding is simply not available. Successful experiments with such models might provide a basis for establishing more funding; at least, that is our hope at Rogers State.

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APPENDIX

FIVE MODELS FOR TEAM TEACHING ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET

Format	Description
Unpaid Overload	One professor is paid for teaching the course while additional faculty members do not receive credit toward their teaching load. One of the more common mechanisms for team teaching.
Guest Lectures	One professor teaches the course, and numerous others give one-time lectures. Not full team teaching, but worthwhile as an intermediate step.
Shared Assignments	Two courses that coordinate major (and some minor) assignments. Substantial readings are discussed in both classes with both professors participating. One term paper is begun, revised, and peer-reviewed in a composition class, for instance, for final submission in humanities.
The Block Course	Two courses that meet together every time as a two-hour block course three times a week. Both faculty members participate fully in all sessions and activities, and both grade every assignment. Ideally, all course materials and activities are fully integrated.
Joint Meetings	Two (or more) courses meet together at regularly scheduled intervals. For instance, a junior honors seminar and a freshman honors seminar meet together twice each month to discuss common readings, with the two faculty facilitating, and once a month the two courses are joined by a sophomore honors seminar, with all three faculty participating.

