

Three in One: *Collaborative Teaching at the College Level*

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Personal and professional growth for students and professors was fostered through collaborative teaching. The departments and college continue to reap rewards. However, time and faculty load issues remain problematic.

Word gets around. Students pass on their opinions about professors to each other with the intention of providing a service not unlike that of Siskel and Ebert. "Stay away from this one. All he does is lecture." "Sign up for the Dr. Doe's course. She's hysterical." There is no doubt that the personality and teaching style of a professor are among the many factors that contribute to a student's success in a course. A student's receptivity to content can vary in response to how well that student relates to the professor, and the range of this variance can be extreme. What works for one student may not work for another and it is unreasonable for any one professor to assume that his or her teaching methodology will contribute to each student's success equally. But what if the student had more than one professor in a class? Given the different personalities, experiences, and teaching styles that two, or possibly even three professors might bring to any one classroom, it seems likely that each student might have a better chance of finding some characteristic with which to relate.

This type of teaching situation was recently attempted in the Masters of Education program at Kennesaw State University. Three professors representing two departments and a myriad of teaching styles, experiences and personalities were assigned to teach a graduate course in developing portfolios. Students enrolled in the course brought a comparable array of learning styles, experiences, and personalities. There was a great potential for both students and professors to find and connect the commonalities. For example, students in the class were middle grades and early childhood education majors. The combination of professors represented both of these fields. Other characteristics with which students in the course might identify were specialty areas of teaching, learning task structure, experience with and computer type preference, and research interests and preferences.

The primary advantage of attending a class with a trio of professors was the opportunity for students to interact with the wider variety of teaching styles and areas of expertise inherent in a team teaching approach. Engagement with three professors afforded the students an occasion to identify with some attribute of at least one professor. The resulting relationship offered the opportunity for information and experiences provided in the class to be better received and retained by the student.

Advantages of collaborative teaching are not limited to students. The professors have benefited both personally and professionally. The same qualities that students identify as common interests are also available to colleagues. Mutual interests at home or at the workplace served to foster collegiality and friendship among collaborating professors. The traditional sense of isolation that many

teachers encounter was lessened through this collaborative teaching effort.

The two departments represented by the professors also derived benefits. The trio format increased communication between the departments concerning a critical need area. Delivery of the new portfolio policy was more consistent because both departments were involved.

Finally, the college continues to benefit from this effort. In effect, the trio was modeling the collaborative approach to teaching espoused by the college. When professors tackle a new learning curve, they reinforce the concept of college instructors as practioners and life-long learners. Additionally, the involvement of the trio has continued beyond that course. Despite the fact that one professor has since moved to another college, the trio continues to work together on a variety of projects. Thus, the initial effort has lead to the level of inter-college collaboration.

Placing three professors in one classroom is not without its challenges. Students who prefer a more obvious structure showed signs of confusion when attempting to "figure out" the pecking order among the three professors. Just as children attempt to play "Mom against Dad," a few students attempted to negotiate a better answer between professors.

There were also challenges for the professors. Planning and teaching together requires a conscious effort to compromise in content and methodology. This planning begins well before the first day of the course and consumes an inordinate amount of time. When planning for the Portfolio class, the three professors proudly expounded on their areas of expertise and radically different perceptions of the importance of various areas of content with the class. Plans were made; specific topics in each class were assigned to the person with that area of expertise; and the class was off and running. Despite the advanced planning, individual enthusiasm resulted in some overlap during presentation of information or during activities. The results of the overlap were not always appreciated by the students whose learning style did not match the environment evoked by team teaching.

Similarly, the departments and college were challenged by questions of time allotment, scheduling and faculty load. The power of team teaching may be overshadowed at the college level by policies designed for the one professor classroom.

In summary, this was an excellent learning experience for all involved. For the students who could see beyond the lecture mode of the typical college class, this proved to be an opportunity to benefit from a variety of personality and presentation techniques. The professors enjoyed a valuable professional development opportunity. The departments and colleges involved moved to new levels of collaboration. Everyone involved agrees that when special talents are utilized to their fullest extent, everyone benefits from the combined strength of the individuals. And the word gets around. •