By Susan M. Chesler and Judith M. Stinson

Susan M. Chesler is Clinical Professor of Law and Judith M. Stinson is Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law in Tempe, Ariz.

It’s a common dilemma for professors: How can I add new skills to my writing class when I don’t necessarily feel comfortable with my level of knowledge and don’t necessarily want (or have time) to become an expert in this new skill? How can I expand my students’ learning experiences more efficiently? Collaborative teaching may be the answer.

Collaborative teaching (or co-teaching) involves two or more faculty who regularly and purposefully share instructional responsibility for a single group of students. Collaborative teaching has been used in secondary education, special education, and undergraduate courses for quite some time, but has been slow to catch on in legal education—including in legal writing and other skills courses.

There are numerous ways to incorporate the models of collaborative teaching into legal writing classrooms, whether for a single classroom exercise or an entire course, that take advantage of its vast potential while minimizing its possible downsides. This short article describes the primary models of collaborative teaching and each of their potential impacts on the classroom, and suggests ways to effectively use each model in legal writing classes.

1. Types of Collaborative Teaching

Collaborative teaching has a broad definition; it ranges from little coordination to fully collaborating on planning, teaching, and assessing the same students. There are four basic models of collaborative teaching: team teaching, complementary co-teaching, station teaching, and alternative (or tag-team) teaching.¹

a) Team Teaching

In the team teaching model, the members of the team co-teach alongside one another and share responsibility for planning, teaching, and assessing the progress of all students in the class throughout the entire course. Team teaching involves the greatest level of collaboration among the professors.

b) Complementary Co-Teaching

With complementary co-teaching, one member of the co-teaching team supplements or complements the instruction provided by the other member of the team; one person has primary responsibility for teaching, while the other professional may provide more individualized assistance to students. Complementary co-teaching is very similar to team teaching and is often used where the complementary teacher provides more individualized instruction to a subset of students within the class as needed. Both faculty members are, however, covering the same course material.

c) Station Teaching

In the station teaching model, the teachers divide both content and students. Each teacher teaches certain content to one group and then, moving to the next “station,” repeats the instruction to the next set of students. This type of collaborative teaching is almost like creating smaller classes within a bigger classroom. Each faculty member focuses on teaching different material, ultimately to the same set of students in the larger class.

d) Alternative (or Tag-Team) Teaching

With alternative teaching, teachers take turns presenting different content to the same group of students. Alternative teaching can be used for an entire course or select topics. Teachers could, for example, alternate by teaching different topics every class period throughout the semester, or one faculty member may teach only one (or a few) topics throughout the course. Alternative teaching does involve more than just being a guest lecturer; both faculty have responsibility, to some extent, for planning, teaching, and assessing students.

2. Potential Benefits and Drawbacks of Collaborative Teaching

Collaborative teaching can have a number of potential benefits, to both the faculty and the students. Although collaborative teaching provides a variety of benefits, there are, of course, some potential drawbacks. Keeping these in mind can help minimize the potential for problems.

a) Potential Benefits

First, collaborative teaching can improve the quality of faculty teaching and scholarship. Through collaborative teaching, faculty can learn new perspectives, teaching techniques, and areas of expertise; they can learn from each other and broaden their horizons in terms of how they teach, what they teach, and what knowledge they have to offer others (in terms of scholarship and conference presentations). Learning from each other can occur during planning discussions, through sharing teaching ideas, and by watching each other in the classroom. Collaborative teaching can also promote effective mentorship to new faculty, presenting unique opportunities for hands-on mentoring of newer teachers or teachers who are new to the particular field. Furthermore, sharing some of the workload involved in planning, teaching, and assessing students can lessen faculty fatigue and burnout, especially for those of us that have been teaching the same courses for a long time. Collaborative teaching also provides an incentive to do things differently in your classes. We often think about really "shaking it up," but then tend to resort to what we've always done (because of time constraints and simple inertia); involving a colleague can dramatically increase the chances of actually doing things differently.

More importantly, a collaborative teaching environment can provide a variety of benefits to students. Generally, students can benefit from broader coverage of course material, expanded teaching styles, and hearing differing viewpoints. The course can cover additional material due to the expanded expertise of the teachers. In addition, collaborative teaching can prevent boredom and keep students more engaged by allowing for more creativity and flexibility in teaching approaches. Collaborative teaching also increases the chance that students will be exposed to varied teaching styles, which can appeal to a broader array of students with different learning styles. Hearing from more than one teacher in the classroom can be more interesting to students and breaks up the monotony (we know we often get bored with ourselves in front of the classroom week after week!). By providing differing viewpoints, collaborative teaching can also allow students to see more than one side of an issue, which is often essential to fully understanding complex legal issues. Finally, co-teachers can model critical thinking, professionalism, and effective collaboration—such as the respectful exchange of ideas and debate. Working well with others is a key practical lawyering skill that is often overlooked in law school courses.

b) Potential Drawbacks

In addition to its benefits, collaborative teaching may present some disadvantages for faculty. First, it requires a greater level of coordination and planning, especially the first few times a course is taught collaboratively. Coordination and planning take time, so collaborative teaching may actually increase both faculty members’ workloads, at least initially. In addition, course scheduling can become much more complicated. Collaborative teaching also creates a potential for conflict between faculty members; the literature highlights the importance of collaborative teaching being voluntary and the need to carefully select who teaches together. Faculty should not be forced to collaborate; for
example, having legal writing faculty arbitrarily teamed up with a doctrinal faculty member may pose problems if there is a power imbalance (and one professor should never end up effectively serving as a “TA” for another professor!).

Collaborative teaching may also present downsides for at least some students. Following up on the challenges collaborative teaching may pose for faculty, if those issues are not properly addressed, poor planning, disorganization, and conflicts between faculty can lead to student confusion. The course can, to the students, feel like separate courses (rather than one course being taught collaboratively). This is likely to enhance students’ anxiety over course objectives and assessment. In addition, some students may flourish in a highly structured and consistent environment; those students might actually prefer and learn better with only a single voice and a consistent learning style in the classroom. Furthermore, in addition to creating scheduling issues for faculty, collaborative teaching may create scheduling difficulties for students, especially if faculty opt to combine different sets of students for some classes. Finally, collaborative teaching can lead to too much “teacher talk” and less active student participation. Let’s be realistic: faculty like to talk. The more faculty, quite often the more talk (think here: faculty meetings). Faculty who teach collaboratively should pay special attention to this potential problem and keep each other (and themselves!) in check on the amount of “teacher talk” happening in the classroom to ensure effective student engagement.

3. Incorporating Collaborative Teaching into Legal Writing Courses

Legal writing professors can take advantage of the varied benefits that collaborative teaching can bring to skills courses in a variety of ways. Depending on the nature of the particular course or skill you are teaching, team teaching, complementary co-teaching, station teaching, or alternative teaching might work best. Here are a few suggestions on ways to effectively incorporate each collaborative teaching model into legal writing classes.

a) Team Teaching

Team teaching is likely to work best in a summer course or intersession course because those courses are offered over a shortened time frame and often to a small number of students, rather than semester-long courses during the academic year. While team-teaching may not create as many administrative concerns for non-legal writing faculty, in the legal writing context it’s often difficult to allocate two teachers to one group of students without forcing colleagues to absorb additional students and increase the institution’s student-to-teacher ratios.

For example, one of the authors team-taught a summer CLEO-type (Council on Legal Education Opportunity) class with a legal writing colleague. Team teaching made the class much more fun and interesting, both for the teachers and for the students. Team teaching also allowed the teachers to take advantage of individual strengths (and overcome weaknesses); one of the team teachers was much better at big-picture issues and global concepts, and the other was better at detail. Together, the course was stronger than it would have been if taught individually.

b) Complementary Co-Teaching

Complementary co-teaching works well for specific topics, such as research instruction. For example, some of us have used this method of collaborative teaching to offer research labs to our legal writing students. The legal writing professor teaches research skills and strategies in the classroom, and a law librarian provides hands-on research training to students.

Complementary co-teaching would also work well on a smaller scale for in-class exercises or modules relating to additional skills. For example, it could be used to teach negotiation skills or ethical considerations and professionalism, both of which can often be best learned through small-group exercises or simulations. An additional professor could supplement by lending his or her expertise in the specific skills and by working directly with some of the small groups. This would save time because more than one group can get feedback and faculty input or perform the simulation at the same time.
c) Station Teaching

Station teaching is likely to work best for concrete tasks such as citation. For example, in an 18-person legal writing classroom, students could be divided into three groups of six students to work on a number of citation problems. Three faculty could go group to group, instructing them on a specific set of citation rules and having them work through a series of examples for 15 minutes per station. Teacher A could teach case citation; teacher B could teach statutory citation; and teacher C could teach secondary source citation.

Station teaching could be used to introduce a variety of skills at the same time, like a progressive dinner party where students travel to different stations. This method might work well if skills were broken down into transactional versus litigation skills and could be particularly useful during orientation or "transition to law practice" courses, where introduction rather than in-depth instruction is the goal.

d) Alternative (or Tag-Team) Teaching

Alternative teaching is probably the most efficient type of collaborative teaching and the easiest to implement in legal writing and skills courses. Alternative teaching works well in classes with discrete topics that can be naturally divided.

Alternative teaching would work well to introduce additional skills, such as interviewing, counseling, and drafting, into traditional first-year classes. Similarly, it could be used to introduce additional skills in an advanced survey course, such as including legislative drafting or contract drafting in a transactional skills course. And it could be used to combine doctrine and skills in a course that focused on, for example, writing and lawyering skills for employment law, for water law, or for criminal law. This method enables each teacher to use his or her expertise to widen the course coverage.

It can be especially helpful when teaching an overload class. For example, one of our colleagues co-teaches a course on Indian Legal Research with a law school librarian using this method; the course is six-weeks long and they divvy up topics based on their knowledge, such as federal legislative history, tribal materials, and treaties. They each need to master their own material, and the students get the benefit of expertise and varying teaching styles of the two faculty members.

In conclusion, collaborative teaching can be an effective teaching tool and one that provides a number of benefits to both faculty and students—so go team up!

© 2015 Susan M. Chelser and Judith M. Stinson

---

2 See William Y. Chin, The Relay Team-Teach Approach: Combining Collaboration and the Division of Labor to Teach a Third Semester of Legal Writing, 13 Perspectives: Teaching Legal Res. & Writing 94 (2005).