

How to Co-Teach Like Dance Partners

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Abstract. This article gives a brief overview of an Intensive English Program (IEP) elective class called “Connecting with Your Community,” which the authors developed together as way to teach new international students the basics of interacting with American college students, finding organizations and activities to join on an American university campus, and locating opportunities to get involved in the local city community. As the authors developed the course curriculum, they decided that co-teaching the class would offer the students more one-on-one attention as well as provide more authentic opportunities for discussion about American culture. Co-teaching, at first glance, can seem like a simple strategy; however, there are actually many factors to consider when entering a co-teaching relationship. Both instructors must be aware of the potential benefits and pitfalls of assuming equal responsibility over a group of students and be committed to the success of the course. It is imperative that instructors have a positive working relationship, establish their roles and responsibilities, arrange for co-planning time, and maintain the support of the administration (Friend 2008). This article offers tips about how to effectively and gracefully navigate any challenges that could arise while co-teaching in order to give everyone—both instructors and students—a positive and rewarding experience.

Co-Teaching in a University Intensive English Program (IEP)

In 2015, when we developed the cross-cultural advising elective class “Connecting with Your Community,” it was a collaborative experience among the members of the advising team. We wanted to create a unique class that would introduce new Applied English Center (AEC) students to the wide array of resources and opportunities on the University of Kansas (KU) campus and within the city of Lawrence and help them to immerse themselves in American college life. We created assignments to foster interaction—interview assignments with native speakers, mandatory attendance at a club meeting or campus event, and field trips to do volunteer work were among the components of this class. Once we had established the goals and learning outcomes of the class, we had to decide how to teach the class. Should only one advisor serve as the instructor? Should two advisors alternate as instructors, each picking up where the other left off? Should we divide the semester into distinct modules, with each module taught

by a different advisor? Finally, after discussing the pros and cons of various course structures and factoring in other considerations, such as instructor availability and our desire to build genuine relationships with the students, we decided to have two advisors co-teach the entire semester.

The term *co-teaching* refers to a model of instruction in which two instructors with a reciprocal relationship share the responsibility for a group of students. The instruction takes place in a single, shared classroom and both instructors have equal ownership over the course content and work together to maximize learning (Friend, 2014). While this seems like a relatively simple concept, it can actually be quite tricky to implement, especially considering that most instructors are used to having a certain level of autonomy to set the rules, lesson plans, and pacing in their own classroom (Walter-Thomas, 1996). After reviewing the literature on successful co-teaching strategies, we also recognized that this model of teaching is rarely, if ever, implemented in higher education. It is typically seen as a popular option in a K-12 setting for classrooms of younger learners which often include ELL or special education students (Friend 2008). Despite the rarity in IEPs or higher education programs, we believed that co-teaching our elective class had many potential benefits for both the students and our own professional growth as instructors.

Benefits of Co-Teaching for Students and Instructors

We found that the students benefited in many ways from the co-teaching model. One benefit was that we were able to give the students more individualized attention. This was important in a class like our elective where the students had intermediate to advanced levels of English proficiency. While the more advanced students caught on quickly, some of the less proficient students needed more scaffolding, which one instructor could help provide when we broke into small groups for activities. Reported in Friend and Reising (1993), the students “perceive[d] that someone is always available to assist them” (p. 6).

Additionally, having two instructors in the class allowed us to be more creative in delivering the lessons. Students could listen to us perform model dialogues, and we could use role-play activities to teach new vocabulary and conversational English. The different perspectives which we offered on American culture and campus life also spurred thoughtful questions and spontaneous discussions between the instructors and students. There were many authentic speaking and listening opportunities that just are not possible with only one instructor in the classroom.

Co-teaching provided many benefits for us as instructors as well. In addition to having more freedom to be creative with our lessons and being able to spend more time getting to know the students through small-group activities and individual conversations, we had the weekly opportunity to observe and be observed by another “expert.” As instructors, we do not always have many opportunities to watch lessons taught by our colleagues. We typically have our classes observed once during the semester generally by a person who is evaluating us and offering summative assessment rather than offering collaborative support. However, co-teaching actually gave us the chance to observe each other frequently and much more informally. It was valuable to see how another instructor explained a topic and interacted with the students and it led to reflection on one’s own teaching style. This experience contributed to the feeling a sense of “professional renewal” (Friend and Reising, 1993).

Additionally, co-teaching helped reduce the feeling of professional isolation. According to several studies on voluntary co-teaching partnerships, many co-teachers have reported increased levels of motivation and professional growth (Dove, 2010). We found this to be true through our own experience as well. Often times, instructors are so busy during the semester that there is not as much time to interact with our colleagues as we would like. It was energizing to have this shared experience with a colleague who was equally dedicated to a successful outcome.

Finally, one very significant benefit of co-teaching was being able to share the workload. Our class had a considerable number of logistics to handle due to the nature of the curriculum. There was significant time devoted to arranging guest speakers and communicating with outside offices, such as the University's Spencer Art Museum tour guides, the Center for Community Outreach, and various local businesses, such as the Merc, a local co-op, and the Social Service League Thrift Store. We were able to divide and share this work as well as the materials preparation and the grading responsibilities. It likely would not have been possible to develop such a unique curriculum without a co-teacher with whom to share the workload.

Tips for Creating a Positive Co-Teaching Relationship

When embarking upon a co-teaching relationship, a few factors should be considered. Like any relationship, compatibility will affect how smoothly the co-teaching partnership will go. In an ideal situation, co-teachers can have a discussion before the partnership begins to discern compatibility and discuss potential issues before they arise. It is recommended to discuss background experience, classroom expectations, and workload preferences. In addition, a co-teaching team should consist of voluntary participants. Additional time and effort may be required to coordinate and implement lessons together, and it could be difficult to establish a positive working relationship with a colleague who is in the co-teaching relationship involuntarily.

Even if the co-teaching relationship is not entirely voluntary, there are ways that you can foster a respectful working relationship and avoid conflicts from arising. Discussing the questions from Figure 1 as a way determine compatibility pre-assignment and recognizing differences openly, in a non-judgmental way, helps to turn the assignment into a fruitful professional relationship rather than points of frustration.

	Discussion Questions for Potential Co-Teachers
1.	What are your basic classroom rules? What are the consequences?
2.	What instructional methods do you like to use?
3.	What kind of technology do you like to use in your class?
4.	Describe your typical tests and quizzes. What other projects or assignments do you give?
5.	How do you handle student absences or late work?
6.	How do you handle communication with students outside of class?
7.	What is your lesson-planning style? What kind of materials do you make?
8.	What is your biggest goal for this class?
9.	How do you hope we can accomplish the goals as a team?
10.	What are your biggest concerns about co-teaching?

Figure 1. Example Discussion Questions. Adapted from Walther-Thomas, 1996

Once a co-teaching partnership is established, it is important it to consider how to make the experience as productive and meaningful as possible. What makes a successful co-teaching partnership? Here are a few tips based on our experience that we believe can help co-teachers gracefully and smoothly execute lessons, making it seem effortless to students and observers.

- **Tip #1: Feel the rhythm of the class.** – Each class is different and you have to adjust your co-teaching methods to the needs and personalities of the class. These are four co-teaching models that worked in our elective course. Before the assignment, both teachers should know and discuss these models and decide together which approach they will use (Friend, 2014).
 - **Station Teaching:** Each teacher leads a small group of students and a third group works independently. The students rotate from group to group so each teacher eventually interacts with all the students.
 - **Parallel Teaching:** Each teacher leads half the class, teaching the same content. We used this model frequently in our class to go over homework or engage in discussion over new material.
 - **Teaming:** This requires teachers to have a very fluid, comfortable relationship. It involves teachers both leading the class interchangeably.
- **Tip #2: Do not step on each other's toes.** Share the power; take turns leading, and know when to step back. The contributions of both professionals need to be equally valued and respected. To help facilitate this, co-teachers can discuss the questions from Figure 2 periodically over the course of the teaching assignment.

	Co-Teaching Checklist
	As Co-Teacher's, we....
YES/ NO	1. each lead whole-group instruction.
YES/ NO	2. share instructional talk time approximately equally.
YES/ NO	3. share classroom management and discipline responsibilities.
YES/ NO	4. clearly communicate to students that we are a teacher partnership.
YES/ NO	5. use the language of "we," "us" and "our," and list our names together on the schedule, website, and syllabus.
YES/NO	6. share responsibility for the students' academic progress and success
	Add additional items for your own situation....

Figure 2. Co-Teaching Checklist. Adapted from Friend, 2014

- **Tip #3: Prepare, practice, and know your part.** Be sure to share the workload equally. When this works, the more trust each teacher has that the other will be prepared, the more risk you can take in lesson planning, leading to innovation.
 - Establish instructional priorities, class expectations and teacher roles;
 - Divide responsibilities evenly;
 - Show commitment to the team with punctuality and preparedness.

- **Tip #4: Communicate.** Lesson planning together is ideal, but teaching and other responsibilities may make it difficult. It is nonetheless important to find a way to plan together, and to make time for post-lesson reflection. This is something for administrators to consider when implementing co-teaching. Various collaborative technology options do exist, however, to facilitate planning coordination, such as Google Docs, Evernote, and Slack.

Concluding Thoughts

Co-teaching can bring many benefits to university IEP. It fosters professional community and creativity and offers novel experiences to students. While there were challenges initially, as in any partnership, to learn how we worked best as a team, it soon became easy to divide tasks and build from each other's strengths. As a student wrote in the *Connecting with Your Community* elective course, "there was a harmonic connection between [the teachers]." Our co-teaching experience was unique and engaging for the students and also for us as instructors. It was an opportunity for growth and reflection, and we would recommend the experience to our colleagues.

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