

### **Introduction**

Co-teaching in higher education is defined as “two or more individuals who come together in a collaborative relationship for the purpose of shared work...for the outcome of achieving what none could have done alone” (Wenzlaff et al., 2002, p. 14). This collaborative relationship creates new opportunities for different ways to engage in curriculum design, planning and teaching. Co-teaching supports the potential of a strong learning community for students and instructors and benefits students and instructors both pedagogically and professionally (Ferguson & Wilson, 2011). Within this dossier for The University of Calgary Teaching Award for Team Teaching, we will outline our co-teaching philosophy, provide exemplars of teaching strategies that enrich student learning and share evidence of critical reflection that contributes to the development of scholarly team-teaching practices.

We have been co-teaching a senior level nursing course entitled ‘The Principles of Teaching and Learning: Nurse as Educator’ since the spring/summer of 2012. Our experiences have brought us together to develop, implement and modify this course, contributing to our growth and development as co-teachers. Our pedagogical perspective and approach has transformed and grown beyond our individual teaching philosophies to a unified co-teaching philosophy. We will explore our co-teaching philosophy through a definition of pedagogy that provides a foundation for a consideration of an epistemological, ontological and ethical perspective of our co-teaching practice.

### **Co-Teaching Philosophy**

Pedagogy has been defined by Kenway and Modra (1992 in Ironside, 2001, p.2) as “what is taught, how it is taught and how it is learned, and more broadly, the nature of knowledge and learning...including how knowledge is produced, negotiated, transformed and realized, in the interaction between the teacher, the learner, and the knowledge itself.” Within this definition, teaching and learning is revealed as an intentional process which requires engagement, interaction with others and knowledge itself, and a willingness to honor diverse perspectives in order to enhance, transform and create new understanding. Through open communication, we explored and discovered that our values surrounding teaching and learning were very similar, and that the values inherently expressed within this definition of pedagogy provided a common framework from which to intentionally and purposefully create and nurture our co-teaching relationship. Laughlin et al. (2011) argued that co-teaching or team-teaching is more than pairing instructors together or teaching in a sequential fashion. Rather, they posit that the success of co-teaching requires “careful preparation” (p. 12). It is through the intentional cultivation of our co-teaching relationship that our collective philosophy has evolved.

### **Epistemological Perspective**

From an epistemological perspective, we consider the nature of knowledge as fluid and transforming. Within the classroom, observational and simulated environments, we engage students in ways that encourage reflection, questioning and challenging of our assumptions and

current understanding. To create an engaging environment that supports students' questioning, challenging assumptions and growing in understanding involves an authentic modeling of open dialogue and exchange of ideas between ourselves and amongst our students. Plank (2011) described team teaching, what we refer to as co-teaching, as involving a "messiness" (p. 2). "Team teaching moves beyond the familiar and predictable and creates an environment of uncertainty, dialogue and discovery" (p. 3). She goes on to state that this approach to teaching is not teacher-centred. Rather, "[t]he interaction of two teachers - both the intellectual interaction involved in the design of the course and the pedagogical interaction in teaching the course creates a dynamic environment that reflects the way scholars make meaning of the world" (p. 3). It is in this dynamic environment that students are exposed to multiple perspectives that "also models for them how different perspectives come together to construct meaning" (p. 3).

### **Ontological Perspective**

Creating a stimulating environment where knowledge is examined, questioned, challenged and mutually created asks that we reflect upon an ontological perspective or the nature of ourselves as co-teachers, the nature of our students and the nature of the connection between and amongst us as a community engaged in teaching and learning. We use the word community, which implies that everyone has a voice and unique perspective to bring to our dialogue. As co-teachers, it is important for us to model being responsive to questioning knowledge and understanding, not only from one another, but also from our students. We strive to create an inviting space that communicates the significance of connection within the teaching/learning community. It is about developing our co-teaching relationship and learning how to react and respond to each other and to the class.

The essence of connection as a core value in our co-teaching approach is characterized as an evolving partnership that implies equity, reciprocity, openness, dialogue, and shared responsibility for learning and growth. The attributes that reflect connection within our co-teaching relationship and within our classroom or teaching / learning context are knowing, trust, respect, and mutuality. 'Knowing' means seeing the humanness in one another, which requires self-awareness relative to beliefs, values, and assumptions held. 'Trust' develops when we embrace 'knowing' one another. It is important for us to be genuine and transparent with one another and extend this to our students, and offer a willingness to admit fallibility, offering congruence between intentions, words and actions. 'Respect' is regarded from the stance that we are individuals with inherent worth, which is extended to our students as well. The final attribute of 'mutuality' is expressed as encompassing shared commonalities and acknowledgement of differences. As co-teaching partners we strive to view ourselves as individuals with innate capacity and experience which informs our approach to teaching and learning and focuses on opportunities to enhance and challenge our own and our students' potential. Co-teaching is "a method that involves fluid interaction between two instructors and requires mutual comfort, trust, and respect" (Laughlin, Nelson, & Donaldson, 2011, p. 14).

## **Ethical Perspective**

An ethical consideration of our co-teaching practice inherently extends from our relationship. Through acknowledging and articulating our individual perspectives and honouring our common goals we advocate for equity within our co-teaching relationship and approach. In effective team taught lessons, there is “an invisible flow of instruction with no prescribed division of authority. Both teachers are actively involved in the lesson. From the students’ perspective, there is no clearly defined leader – both share the instruction, are free to interject information and are available to assist students and answers questions” (Bacharach, Heck & Dahlberg, 2008, p. 11). We are openly transparent in sharing our mutuality and equal status to our students.

For co-teaching to be a successful and meaningful experience, there is a need to have a shared commitment by the team members to co-teaching and to ongoing communication (Laughlin et al., 2011). As recommended by Cook and Friend (1995), co-teachers need to discuss their beliefs about teaching and classroom practices and routines for this leads to the ability to negotiate compromises and to be pro-active in addressing difficult situations. Ongoing, open communication is a necessity both in terms of the development of the relationship, but also in the day-to-day teaching practice. There is a need to develop trust so as to allow for rich dialogue, as well as to accommodate discussions about what is working, but also to address what is not working and why. In addition to learning how to work together in complex and innovative ways, we also have to be accountable to each other and to our students as we facilitate instruction within a team-teaching environment. This modeling within the formal and informal learning environment helps students to appreciate the nature of the collaboration required of them in their professional workplace settings. Embodying our co-teaching philosophy in our everyday practice creates an environment that invites students to actively participate and engage in learning, creating opportunities for them to collaborate, explore, reflect on and develop capacity for deep learning.

## **Student Engagement Strategies**

Modeling collaborative co-teaching practice, our goal is to encourage students to become active participants within the teaching and learning community. This community is characterized by the following practices: gathering, bringing in and calling forth; creating places, keeping open a future of possibilities; assembling, constructing and cultivating; staying, knowing and connecting; caring, engendering community; interpreting, unlearning and becoming; presencing, attending and being open; preserving reading, writing, thinking and dialogue; questioning meaning and making visible (Andrews, C.A., Ironside, P.M., Nosek, C., Sims, S.L., Swenson, M.M., Yeomans, C., et al, 2001). Through the sharing of experiences within this community, students explore meaning and transform their own and others’ understanding and knowledge of teaching practice within the role of nurse as educator.

Our co-teaching approach engages students within an experiential teaching and learning environment framed upon Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Kolb (2005) asserts that there are four modes of learning that reflect two dimensions; perception and processing. These four modes include concrete experience, abstract conceptualization,

reflective observation and active experimentation. Although students have an affinity for ways of perceiving and processing information, we have attempted to support and challenge students to experience learning through all of the four modes as outlined by Kolb (2005), thus fostering independence, the capacity to develop their critical thinking and take a more active role in their learning.

Student learning experiences and assessment of understanding challenges students to cultivate a theoretical understanding while also articulating and demonstrating the application of theoretical knowledge to actual practice. Student learning is enriched through thought-provoking and collaborative discussions within the classroom that offers them a theoretical foundation from which to support their own teaching practice. Embedded within and amongst these theoretical conversations are observational experiences of other nurse educators in practice, providing students the opportunity to view teaching through the lens of the educator and also engage in critical reflective inquiry.

A simulated health care environment is utilized to actively engage students in delivering health education to clients. This learning and assessment strategy requires that students work in pairs to identify a population health need and utilize pedagogical and health education theory to develop teaching and learning approaches to effectively address this need. As a pair, students then present their health education intervention to their colleagues simulating the role of the nurse and the client. What follows is a student-led facilitated debrief to address the elements of the education process and further articulation of our communities growing understanding of teaching practice within health education.

Another student engagement and assessment strategy involves the opportunity for these senior students to teach their junior peers and also offers them a sense of the rewards and challenges of co-teaching. The purpose of this assignment is to examine the implications of nursing education on the delivery of safe, competent and ethical care which influences quality of health care delivery and outcomes. Utilizing a co-teaching approach, the students work in pairs to collaboratively develop and deliver a two to three hour teaching session either in a theory class or an on-campus practice class. Students are supported throughout this assignment and mentored by ourselves as co-teachers within the classroom and also other nurse educators within the faculty.

Students are required to submit their teaching plan and gather and collate feedback on their collaborative teaching session from their teaching peer, their faculty advisor and the junior undergraduate students, both as individuals and as co-teachers. Each student completes a self-reflection based upon their teaching experience and composes a two page synthesis of their experiential learning based upon their observational and actual teaching experiences. The richness and depth of this learning strategy is that students move through all four modes of Kolb's (2005) experiential learning cycle. Students often expound upon the challenge and reward of engaging in this peer teaching session. The challenge is expressed through a perceived lack of competence and capacity to effectively engage in the nurse educator role, while the reward is revealed through a dawning awareness of how much disciplinary knowledge they have acquired and their leadership capacity in mentoring junior students.

Deep learning is also facilitated through the writing of a scholarly paper that asks students to articulate their values, beliefs and philosophy of teaching as it relates to nursing and pedagogy. Through a consideration of their contextual reflections, critical thinking, probing, feedback, dialogue and learning experienced throughout the course, students are encouraged to address strengths and challenges of their teaching practice and identify how learning from the course will influence their future nursing practice. Students are expected to integrate relevant literature to support their understanding of their teaching practice and connect their knowledge to a theoretical foundation. Through enacting collaborative co-teaching practice and cultivating a sense of community scholarship, we strive to encourage and challenge students to move beyond their current understanding, explore meaning and experience transformative teaching and learning. The result is often inspiring.

### **Scholarly Inquiry in Co-Teaching Practices**

As a result of our individual and collective reflection on our co-teaching practice, we have discovered the complexity within co-teaching. Rytivaara and Kershner (2012) noted that co-teaching is “a genuinely peer-learning relationship in which communication shifts between different contexts within and beyond the classroom” (p. 1001). Further, this complexity is compounded by differences of students and curricula. For example, Laughlin et al. (2011) argued with co-instructors offering a previously team-taught course: “new and distinct groups of learners will offer new challenges. The different learners will influence the focus of the curriculum, the direction of discussions, and the interaction of the instructors, which creates a new learning experience for all those involved” (p. 16). This acts as a caution that the co-teaching relationship is dynamic and that the co-instructors need to be responsive to the external stimuli and not assume what worked before will work again. As revealed within the literature and from our own experience, the complexity lies within the fluid nature of knowledge, of honouring our integrated curriculum, of our evolving co-teaching relationship and understanding of our co-teaching practice and the distinctness of each student group. To navigate through this complexity we engage in debriefing discussions following each class in which we create a space that welcomes each other’s perspective and through which we build upon our strengths and plan to manage challenges. This approach enables us to remain flexible and responsive to one another, to our students and to our accountabilities for the curriculum and to the discipline.

Co-teaching within the faculty of nursing is a relatively recent phenomenon that has evolved from the nature of our context relevant, integrated curriculum. Teaching in teams or co-teaching, challenges us to achieve a level of accountability that is different from what we have experienced in the past. This accountability extends to one another, to our teaching practice, to our curriculum, to our students and to our discipline. Reflecting upon the benefits and challenges of co-teaching from our own experience and from within our faculty led us to seek a deeper understanding of pedagogy enacted within a co-teaching or team teaching approach. Our Teaching Development Unit invited our university community colleagues from the Werklund School of Education to come and share their expertise related to co-teaching. The rich discussion and shared experiences that stemmed from this scholarly presentation evolved

into a level of scholarly inquiry in co-teaching that continues to inform and contribute to the development of scholarly co-teaching practices.

Our scholarship relative to co-teaching has afforded us the opportunity to present at the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual University of Calgary Conference on Post-secondary Teaching and Learning. Our colleagues from the Werklund School of Education and ourselves shared our co-teaching experiences and engaged our audience in scholarly discussion in a presentation entitled 'Learning to Dance Well Together: Shared / Team Teaching in Higher Education.' We further contributed to the scholarship of co-teaching through our work in presenting at the Innovators, Designers and Researchers: Leading a New Knowledge Network Conference, sponsored by the Galileo Education Network and Werklund School of Education in May 2013. In partnership with our colleagues we offered a collaborative presentation entitled 'Putting the Co into Co-teaching in Higher Education.' Our formal scholarship through these presentations and our ongoing informal reflexive practice has continued to transform our understanding of co-teaching practice to the level of engaging in research with our Werklund School of Education colleague.

"Although collaborative teaching and planning is not a new phenomenon in higher education, it has not been extensively studied" (Kluth & Straut, 2003, p. 238). Ferguson and Wilson (2011) acknowledged that it is known that faculty members in higher education collaborate on research. Yet, it is not common practice that they collaborate in their teaching. This "lack of experience with co-teaching causes a misalignment between professors' beliefs about its positive impact and their personal instructional practices which result in beginning teachers entering a classroom with only a conceptual understanding of what it means to co-teach" (Ferguson & Wilson, 2011, p. 53). This also applies to nursing students. If they have observed and experienced collaborative teaching in their education, this will help to inform their collaborative practice in their future work settings. It is through our reflective practice that we have begun to deconstruct what is required to be successful collaborators when working in a co-teaching relationship in nursing. It is in this inquiry that we have begun to identify for ourselves what factors are influencing our co-teaching and how those items are intentionally or unintentionally embodied in our everyday co-teaching practice.

Through the use of a self-study methodology (Samaras, 2011) and through collaborative discussion with our colleague from the Werklund School of Education, we have attempted to further the scholarly development of co-teaching practice by answering the following questions. First, what key elements contribute to a healthy co-teaching experience? Second, what are the key factors required to develop and sustain successful collaboration when working in co-teaching relationships in professional faculties in higher education? Through our work we have developed guidelines that are designed to help teachers from across disciplines to develop a co-teaching relationship that supports a positive teaching and learning experience for both teachers and learners. We have co-presented our collective work at the Teaching and Learning Center in a workshop entitled 'Dancing Well Together; Linking Theory to Practice in Co-teaching.' We have also collaboratively written up our scholarship and submitted this work for publication.

Our interest in developing our own and others' co-teaching practice has also extended to an area of scholarship related to peer mentoring. The connection to mentoring lies in the capacity

to enact a co-teaching relationship for the purpose of mentoring a junior colleague who is a novice educator. We will continue to build on this understanding with our university colleagues from a variety of faculties across campus through our ongoing involvement in the Peer Leadership Network.

The University of Calgary's *Eyes High* vision inspires our university community to "enrich the quality and breadth of learning." As educators we are called to embrace this vision and enact teaching practice in a way that supports and enriches the lives of our students. Enacting co-teaching has provided us with a path on which to journey forward and realize this vision.

Sincerely,  
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