

Team-Teaching: Advice and Best Practices

Thank you for your interest in team-teaching in the Honors Program! Team-teaching provides faculty with a wonderful opportunity to develop new, exciting courses, to work with faculty members in other departments, and to provide students with a truly interdisciplinary learning experience. Students develop their critical thinking skills by synthesizing multiple perspectives and improve as students by watching instructors model how to learn, discuss, and debate. In a recent survey, a majority of UNH honors students reported that they found team-taught courses more interesting than single-instructor courses and that they benefited from seeing the different perspectives of the instructors. Faculty, on the other hand, benefit from the opportunity to escape their academic silo and see their own discipline from a new perspective.

Team-teaching is without doubt a rewarding experience for faculty, but it is challenging. Most faculty are used to designing their own syllabus and running their own classroom. Sharing tasks such as lecturing, leading discussions, and grading can be disorienting at first. This document intends to provide faculty with a list of best practices regarding team-teaching in order to help faculty overcome these hurdles.

The list of recommendations below was developed from a survey of education literature as well as an evaluation of team-teaching in the Honors Program conducted by a team of UNH graduate students enrolled in P610, "Program Evaluation," taught by Dr. Mike Morris.

1. Get to Know Your Teaching Partner

The first day of class is a bad time to learn that you and your teaching partner's personalities and teaching styles are incompatible. Be sure to meet in person several times while designing the course and to discuss your teaching philosophy with one another. Some faculty members are highly structured teachers who prefer to have every assignment and activity fully spelled out before the beginning of the semester. Others are more spontaneous and prefer to allow the classroom experience to develop more organically. Instructors who are at the opposite ends of this spectrum will need to work harder to avoid conflict. To observe teaching styles first-hand, future teaching partners could consider sitting in on each other's classes.

2. Realistic Expectations

Faculty in the survey and in the education literature report that team-teaching requires more prep time than single-instructor courses. Faculty members designing and proposing team-taught courses should keep this fact in mind.

3. Planning

Instructors should be careful to plan assignments and grading strategies that meet the objectives of both instructors. Teaching strategies should also be discussed:

- How much 'face-time' will each instructor get?
- How will interaction between instructors be organized?
- How should instructors relate to students? Formally or informally?
- How will instructors solicit student participation? Cold-calling? Warm-calling (i.e. give students a few minutes to write responses first)? Rely on volunteers?
- How will grading responsibilities be divided? How will assignments be assessed?

4. Regular Meetings

Faculty who have team-taught successfully stress the need for regular meetings throughout the semester. Such meetings help faculty stay on the same page with regard to the course material, classroom activities, and grading.

5. Communication with Students

It is crucial that both faculty provide clear (and consistent!) due dates and articulate a coherent set of expectations with regard to assignments. Here are some recommendations:

- Provide students with a clear, detailed syllabus and work out expectations for assignments jointly ahead of time.
- Put course policies and expectations for assignments in writing; if instructors rely on verbal communication then it is easy for instructors to inadvertently tell students different things. Putting expectations in writing avoids 'but he/she said' arguments from students.
- For important matters, delay responding to student inquiries or email until after consulting with the other instructor.

6. Classroom Interaction

Instructors in team-taught courses are expected to attend all class sessions. This is critical because students report that observing real, but respectful, debate between faculty members provides a unique learning experience and helps them to see how problems can be approached from multiple perspectives. Observing instructors criticize each other in a relaxed, professional manner teaches students that criticism is not personal. Team-teaching works best when faculty members are truly teaching together, rather than merely alternating lectures. There are several ways that interaction could be structured:

- One popular method is to alternate having one instructor lecture/lead a discussion while the other instructor asks questions and participates from a seat in the front of the room. This allows the 'interjector' to model learning for other students.
- A second strategy is to have one instructor lead the class for the first hour and then give the other instructor 10-15 minutes at the end of the class to respond to the first instructor's presentation. The second instructor's

- remarks should be constructed during the presentation and could summarize the presentation, disagree on certain points, or make comparisons.
- A third strategy is to have instructors take opposite sides of a debate.
 - However you decide to structure your interaction, both faculty members are expected to attend all classes (barring emergencies or serious professional obligations).

It is important to remember that students, too, have little experience watching faculty members debate. Some students may become frustrated because they want 'the right answer.' Others may misinterpret purposeful debate as evidence of disorganization. Faculty members should anticipate that some students will have these reactions and spend some time at the beginning of class explaining how the instructors will interact with one another. After a class period in which instructors have engaged in debate, it is helpful to sum up the debate, explain its relevance and importance, and link the debate to the larger narrative that the instructors are trying to create.

Finally, debates between faculty members should remain professional and equitable. Students may feel uncomfortable if they perceive that one faculty member constantly dominates discussion.

7. Grading

Students in the survey expressed frustration when faculty members divided grading between them because inevitably faculty members would have different grading standards. There are a few methods to avoid this.

- Instructors could each grade each assignment and then either come to a consensus on a grade or take the average of both grades. This is the ideal solution and should be used in most cases, but requires added time commitment on the part of each instructor.
- Instructors could take turns grading assignments.
- Instructors could grade different parts of each assignment.
- In all of the above cases, instructors should clearly describe the grading method to students in advance. The creation of a clear grading rubric also helps avoid discrepancies.

8. Ask for Help

Remember that many faculty members at UNH have already team-taught in the Honors Program. They are a great reservoir of experience for those new to team-teaching. If you would like a list of experienced instructors, simply contact the program at honors@newhaven.edu.

9. Literature:

The list below is by no means comprehensive, but may prove useful for those who wish to do further reading.

- Benjamin, J. "The scholarship of teaching in teams: What does it look like in practice?" *Higher Education Research and Development* 19 (2000), pp. 191-204.
- Cowan, Michael A., et al. "Creating Conversations: An Experiment in Interdisciplinary Team Teaching," *College Teaching* 43.4 (1995), pp. 127-131.
- Davis, J. R. *Interdisciplinary Courses and Team Teaching: New Arrangements for Learning* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1995).
- Letterman, Margaret and Dugan, Kimberly. "Team Teaching a Cross-Disciplinary Honors Course: Preparation and Development," *College Teaching* 52.2 (2004), pp. 76-79.
- Lindauer, David L. "A New Approach to Team Teaching," *The Journal of Economic Education* 21.1 (1990), pp. 71-72.
- Shibley, Ivan A., Jr. "Interdisciplinary Team Teaching: Negotiating Pedagogical Differences," *College Teaching* 54.3 (2006), pp. 271-274.
- Silver, William S., et al. "Stage 3: Adventures in Team Teaching," *Journal of Management Education* 20.4 (1996), pp. 435-445.