

**Team Teaching in the School of Communication at Point Park University,
Pennsylvania: An Innovative Instruction Approach**

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Abstract

The authors are employed in the School of Communication at Point Park University, Pittsburgh, PA where they, among others, teach the introductory course in the School of Communication: *Introduction to Mass Communication*. This paper investigates an innovative way of teaching *Introduction to Mass Communication* at Point Park University

Students who are enrolled in the fall semester of each academic year are instructed according to the team teaching method which means students receive instruction from several instructors. During the team-taught fall sections, each instructor teaches his/her area of expertise for roughly three weeks, then proceeds to a new classroom and teaches the same lectures again for three weeks before moving on to the next classroom. This allows students to meet five of the professors in the school and hear their real-life experiences and stories. Students sometimes express difficulty with switching teachers every three weeks. During the spring semester the class is taught with one instructor covering the entire textbook.

The participants consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in one of five sections of the class offered in the Fall 2009 semester AND undergraduate students enrolled in the one section in the Spring 2010 semester. Capacity is set at 35 students per section.

The study investigated whether it would be possible to determine whether the team-taught method was more effective than the method where one instructor taught the entire course. Variables that were investigated include course grades and evaluations. Evaluations are done at the end of the semester where students have to evaluate instructors as well as the team-teaching methodology.

The significance of this study lies in that it could provide a template for teaching similar courses at other institutions where several sections of the same course are offered each semester.

I INTRODUCTION

What is team teaching? According to Bess (2000) in Yanamandram & Noble (2005) team teaching is defined “as a process in which all team members are equally involved and responsible for student instruction, assessment and the setting and meeting of learning objectives.” Yanamandram & Noble (2005) continue by stating “that team teaching comprises a continuum of practices that ... can be described as weak or strong ... Weak forms of team teaching are those where there is little evidence of collaboration and/or involvement by team members in the planning, management and delivery of a course.” On the more positive side, one finds strong team-teaching “where team members are both intimately and equally involved in all aspects of the planning, management and delivery of a subject.”

Team teaching, as it is practiced at Point Park University (PPU), is one of FIVE co-teaching approaches and will be discussed in greater depth once the most commonly known four co-teaching approaches have been discussed briefly.

With the **one teach, one support approach**, one teacher carries the primary responsibility for planning and teaching. The task of the second individual is to move around the classroom while assisting individuals and observing particular behaviors. Using a **parallel teaching** method, a teacher and student teacher plan jointly but split the classroom in half to teach the same information at the same time. **Alternative teaching** proposes that one teacher manages the majority of the class while the second

teacher engages a small group that can be either done inside or outside the classroom. It should be obvious that the small group does not have to integrate with the current lesson. **Station teaching** involves the division of instructional content where each instructor is responsible planning and teaching what was bestowed upon such an instructor. The fifth co-teaching approach (team teaching), specifically the approach that is used in School of Communication at PPU, will form the basis and concentration of this paper.

Team teaching involves a number of instructors who work together as a team in instructing students. Such “teams can be single-discipline, interdisciplinary, or school-within-a-school teams that meet with a common set of students over an extended period of time.” Quinn and Kanter (1984) state several options of team teaching, but the one that closest resembles the one utilized at PPU, is “planning is shared, but teachers each teach their own specialism or their own skills area to the whole group.”

II TEAM TEACHING AT THE SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION, POINT PARK UNIVERSITY, PA

Unlike the situation where “universities are expected to do more with less” and many individuals and faculties, addressing this dilemma by adopting “alternate methods of teaching that goes beyond the traditional model of one teacher, one class” (Yanamandram & Noble, 2005), the team teaching approach in the School of Communication at PPU has evolved over a 12-year period.

The team teaching approach at PPU as it is known today, was introduced in 1998 under the former chair of the then Department of Journalism and Mass Communication that was an integral part of the School of Arts and Science. According to Professor Helen Fallon, Founding Dean of the School of Communication and last chair of the former Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, the introduction of team teaching happened by accident.

The professor who was teaching the *Introduction to Mass Communication* was in ill health and found it difficult to meet his teaching schedule. Considering that the faculty was spread very thin at the time, it was decided that each faculty member would teach in the area of his/her expertise. This was considered to be the optimal solution as:

- It stretched the faculty much further as each member would only do the necessary preparation for the area that were to be taught, and
- Students would meet, and get to know, more than one faculty member and this would also serve as a great retention tool.

When the team teaching method was introduced at Point Park University, it started off with four sections that grew into five and in the fall 2009 semester a sixth section was added which was reserved for Honors students who are taught by one professor, viz. the Director of the Honors College. The Honors section became necessary because of the many Honors students enrolled in the School of Communication.

When asked why she was in favor of this method, Professor Fallon replied that she considered this to be an excellent way of maximizing faculty resources and that students get to meet various faculty members. An interesting observation of Professor Fallon is that it also prevents students from leaving. "Students act with their feet and if they do not like a professor, they leave. In this instance, if they do not like a professor, they only have to put up with him/her for five lectures." Furthermore, students also receive a better quality education as various experts of their respective fields instruct them. According to Fallon, the team teaching method, a la the School of Communication at PPU, enhances collegiality among faculty members as those who are involved meet on a regular basis and exchange experiences and look for ways on how to improve their teaching.

In the fall semester of each semester the course, *Introduction to Mass Communication* in the School of Communication at PPU, is taught via a different method compared to the spring semester. This is because of the high numbers of enrollment during the fall. In the fall, close to 200 students are divided into six sections (this paper will deal with the first five sections as the sixth section consists of Honors students who are taught by the Director of the Honors College). According to the team taught method employed at PPU, students remain in their respective sections in the classroom that was allocated to each section, while instructors rotate between sections.

The semester starts off with the assembly of ALL students in the Ballroom (a large gathering room at the university) where students are introduced to the instructors and the team teaching method is explained to them. According to this method, for example, the principal author who is responsible for teaching

Law and Ethics, would start with a section on the second day of classes (first day was the assembly of all students in the ballroom, remember?) and have these students for a total of FIVE lectures, each lecture being 75 minutes long. During this time, the instructor would use whatever method he sees fit to teach students Law and Ethics, give students a topic for a paper relevant to the Law and Ethics section, and finally, the students will take an exam on Law and Ethics. The instructor will then proceed to the second section where the process is repeated, in this case, only teaching/instructing Law and Ethics, and continue doing so until he has instructed all five sections in Law and Ethics. Grades are posted to Blackboard™, web-based course management software used at the university. This system enables students to access their grades without having to interact with a specific instructor. In the event of a grade dispute, said instructor is available to take it up with a student. The same procedure is followed for the other areas: Print Journalism, Broadcasting, Visual/Interactive Media, Advertising/PR.

In the spring, because of the lower demand, the course is taught with one instructor covering all five areas mentioned above. The same procedure is followed in terms of number of assignments, exams, and posting of grades – content wise there is no difference between the fall and spring semester; the only difference is the method of instructing: team teaching vs. instruction by an individual.

III LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written about co-teaching, but the authors found much less about team teaching, and even less when looking for literature to compare to the method employed in the School of Communication at PPU. A similar approach was found at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma (USAO). In the late 1960s, the university was instructed to identify fresh and viable approaches to the problems of higher education en to employ interdisciplinary methods of instruction. Heeding the call, it resulted in the development of a 41-credit hour interdisciplinary core sequence that had to be completed by all graduates.

At USAO teams consisted of instructors from different academic fields who brought a variety of perspectives to subjects under consideration. Certain problems were experienced, however, the concept of team teaching was successful in terms of faculty response and student acceptance. According to Dr. Shafer who was instrumental in implementing this approach, “there is no more effective method of simulating in the classroom real life conditions of conflicting demands and competing values.”

According to the approach adopted by USAO, there were two versions available. With version one, all instructors were jointly responsible for course content, presentations, and grading according to which they interacted in front of the class and discussed specific topics from divergent perspectives. With the second version the instructors were all jointly responsible for course content and grading, but they took turns in presenting material appropriate to their individual areas of specialization.

The most comparable scholarly research on team teaching was found in an article by Professors Yanamandram and Noble of the University of Wollongong, Australia (2005). Yanamandram and Noble investigated the reflections of students on the strengths and weaknesses of team teaching. Data was collected from 440 student responses and the authors concluded that although students can recognize the advantages that arise through lectures from “experts,” there could be too much variation in teaching styles. Yanamandram and Noble stated that good and bad lectures exist regardless of team teaching, in other words: team teaching will not turn a bad lecturer into a good one, and vice versa. Furthermore, the authors stated that “the benefit of team teaching assumes that expert researchers also make expert teachers and not only communicate clearly the concepts in their area of expertise, but also supply students with an atmosphere conducive to learning.” They then referenced McKeachie (1994) who stated that is not necessarily the case.

The University of Oregon (Eugene) has a web page with instructions for faculty on how to practice team teaching across disciplines, but do not give/provide any examples of this teaching method.

The College of Education at James Madison University (JMU) identified the five approaches to co-teaching that were discussed earlier on and point out the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. However, JMU do not provide/discuss examples of anyone of the five methods that may have been implemented at the university.

Although a substantial number of publications were found that dealt with co-teaching in high schools, they were not included in this study as the authors were seeking scholarly research that dealt with co-teaching at the tertiary level. Furthermore, the authors sought out scholarly research dealing with team teaching methods comparable to what is done at PPU but were not very successful in this regard either.

IV RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study was to determine which is the more effective way of instructing students about mass media: team teaching or individual teaching.

V METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in one of five sections of *Introduction to Mass Communication* offered in the Fall 2009 and 2010 semesters AND undergraduate students enrolled in the one section during the Spring 2009 and 2010 semesters. Capacity is set at 35/section.

B. Procedure

This study analyzes student evaluations. Evaluations are complemented by interviews with students dealing with which method they preferred. In addition, retention data of the two groups as well as course grades will be compared and evaluated. This will provide a picture of whether students view one method as more successful than the other as well as whether grades and retention are affected by the method in which they were taught. The significance of this study is that it could provide a template for teaching similar courses at other institutions where several sections of the same course are offered each semester. Data was collected from 337 respondents in the two fall semesters.

VI FINDINGS

A. Grade distribution 2008 – 2010 (two fall semesters two spring semesters)

The authors requested the grade distribution from the Registrar at PPU in order to determine if there was any significant difference between grades obtained under either of the teaching methods which are reflected in TABLE I below.

TABLE I
Team-taught classes

GRADE	A	B	C	D	F	TOTAL
n	24	126	107	42	35	337
%	7	37	32	12	10	98%

Individually taught classes

GRADE	A	B	C	D	F	TOTAL
n	6	14	14	1	3	38
%	16	37	37	3	8	101%

B. Evaluations

As is the case with most, if not all universities (public and private) in the USA, students have to evaluate instructors at the end of each semester. In addition to students having to do this in the team-taught sections of *Introduction to Mass Communication*, students were also requested to complete an additional survey on the team teaching method that was used to teach this course. Students were asked for their opinions on this teaching method, as well as their recommendation on how to improve this course, opinions on individual instructors, and finally, to rank this teaching method.

Students had to comment on the **value and effectiveness** of the team teaching method that was used for instruction in Introduction to Mass Communication. Responses were grouped into three categories.

1. Excellent concept as each instructor is an expert in his/her field/best of 5 worlds/ informative and useful.

Fifty-nine percent (199/337) of the respondents fell in this category. This number represents nearly three out of every five students and can be considered very positive.

2. Too rushed/too short period to get to know instructor/prefer one teacher

Twenty-nine percent (98/337) of students had a negative opinion of the team teaching method.

3. Other

The comments of fewer than 12% (40/337) of the respondents did not fit into either one of the first two categories and were grouped together under the “other” category.

C. Ratings

Using a 5-point Likert scale, students were asked to rate the team teaching method where 1=Poor, 3=Average and 5=Excellent. The results are summarized in Table III below.

TABLE III

	5	4	3	2	1	TOTAL
n	75	143	95	17	7	337
%	22	42	28	5	2	99

VII DISCUSSION

A. Grade Distribution

The number of subjects enrolled in the spring semester during 2009 and 2010, amounted only to 10% of the total number of subjects under study; thus it would not be feasible to draw any comparison because of the small number of subjects. However, it would appear that the grade distribution compares favorably to that of the fall semesters during which nearly nine times as many students were enrolled.

B. Evaluations

- Excellent concept as each instructor is an expert in his/her field/best of 5 worlds/ informative and useful.

Nearly 60% of respondents responded positively to the team teaching method. Although most researchers would have preferred a higher number of respondents in this category, it is double the number who did not approve of the team teaching method. This rate compares very favorably with that of the study that was conducted at the University of Wollongong, Australia in 2003, which yielded a 63% positive response.

- Too rushed/too short period to get to know instructor/prefer one teacher

It should be obvious that the 29% who responded in this manner, would have felt more at home in the individually taught class in the spring semester.

- Nineteen percent of respondents contributed a wide array of comments and these were grouped in a category justifiable named: “other.”

It should be noted that all these comments, whatever they were, were not in favor of the team teaching method and expressed a negative view of this method. The extent of these comments could not be grouped in the category of “too rushed/too short period to get to know instructor/prefer one teacher.”

C. Ratings

1. The authors believe that the most interesting observation of the study could be that only 24 respondents (7%) rated the team teaching method at the 2-point (below average) or 1-point (poor) level. However, when one looks at the evaluation categories that were discussed earlier, one will note that 138 respondents did not agree that the team teaching method was an “excellent concept as each instructor is an expert in his/her field; or that it offered the best of five worlds; or that it was informative and useful.” It would seem to make sense to assume that these 138 respondents would rate the course at below average. They did not, only 24 did. Of the remaining 114 respondents, 95 rated the team teaching method as average that means that 19 respondents **who did not agree with the team teaching method**, ranked this at either the 4-point (above average) or 5-point (excellent) level! Not only did they not agree with the team teaching concept, they also stated that they would have preferred to attend a class that was instructed by one individual – yet, look at the rankings that the team teaching method received from these individuals?
2. Along the same lines of the rationale expressed in #1: when one analyzes Table III, one will notice that 218 respondents rated the team teaching method at either the 5-point (excellent) or the 4-point level (above average), yet when asked of the **value and effectiveness** of the team teaching concept, 199 of the respondents agreed that the team teaching concept belonged in the “best” category ... 19 fewer respondents who rated this at the 5- and 4-point level!
3. The significance of the ratings, the authors believe, can be seen in the fact that nearly two out of every three students (64%) rated this method as being between “above average” and

“excellent” while only 7/337 (2%) rated it as poor, and 17/337 (5%) below average; thus, the students who have a negative perception of the team teaching method as done at PPU, represents only 7% of students who were enrolled in team taught classes vs. the near 66% who approved of this method.

VIII RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Given the small number of students who enroll during the spring semester, it would be feasible to include more spring semesters in the sample size in order to make these classes more representative – maybe four to six spring semesters versus two, even one, fall semesters which would enable researchers to make a more meaningful and favorable comparison.
2. Given that 29% of the respondents would have felt more at home in the spring semester when this course is taught by one individual, it is recommended that students, when assembling in the ballroom for the fall semester are made aware of the fact that if the concept of team teaching does not appeal to them, they have the opportunity to enroll for the spring semester during which the class will be taught by one instructor.

IX CONCLUSION

Many instructors at tertiary institutions have negative perceptions of team teaching. The most common one being that it is a way for instructors to reduce their teaching load; i.e. two individuals teaching a course and both receiving full credit for the course! The principal author has first hand knowledge of a similar situation. However, those situations are far and few between and that is definitely NOT the case at PPU.

Instead, the way it is practiced at PPU and other institutions (such as the University of Wollongong in Australia), it is beneficial to students and serves their best interests. Students who receive this form of instruction, have the privilege to be taught by various experts in their respective fields.

In this experiment the authors aimed to determine what the views and opinions of students about team teaching were. While compiling this report, the principal author asked himself the same question that was posed to students: "What are your views on the team teaching approach used in Journalism 1010?" And he offers the following: " I love this method, but I have only five lectures to learn the names of between 30 and 35 students. This is very hard, if not impossible." And then he remembered an incident that occurred early during the fall 2010 semester while he was waiting for the elevator. A student came up to him, and said: "Dr. XXXXX, please tell me that you remember me ... I enjoyed your class so much."

He looked at her and said: "Miss, you sat in the second row of my class, next to the young man who wore outrageous baseball caps. You contributed all the time, and whenever you spoke, I was impressed. However, I cannot remember your name. As I told you when we first met, it was going to be an impossible task. And, I do apologize." She looked at him and said: "I understand. I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoy the way y'all teach that course. Thank you."

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