



A Better Model for

Co-teaching helps universities and their school partners transform student teaching.

Teresa Washut Heck and Nancy Bacharach

Think back to your student-teaching experience. Did your cooperating teacher expect you to observe and then conduct small parts of lessons but give you few opportunities to practice and develop your skills? Conversely, did your cooperating teacher hand over all the classroom

responsibilities and proceed to leave the room, forcing you to sink or swim? Perhaps you were fortunate enough to work with a cooperating teacher who struck the right balance— modeling expert management and superior teaching methodologies, answering your questions, allowing you to take on increasing

responsibilities, and providing guidance and mentoring to help you develop into a professional. No matter which of these three scenarios you identify with, student teaching was probably an important part of your journey to becoming a teacher.

But despite its importance, the student-teaching experience has been

left largely to chance. A 2010 study by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) found that clinical experiences were haphazard and disconnected from coursework. Specifically, the report noted that states “are silent on what this crucially important experience should look like, and how programs should be held accountable” (p. 4). Although cooperating teachers are key to providing a rich student-teaching experience, few universities provide consistent and focused training to prepare these teachers to work with teacher candidates (Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002).

Co-Teaching Comes to St. Cloud

In the early 2000s, St. Cloud State University in Minnesota was placing more than 500 teacher candidates a year and

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& Friend, 1995). But applying this co-teaching model to our student-teaching program would be a new twist on an old practice—one that we hoped would transform the relationship between cooperating teachers and teacher candidates.

Our traditional student-teaching model had provided cooperating teachers with little or no guidance about how to mentor their teacher candidates. Cooperating teachers generally began by leading all instruction,

ferential that existed between them.

In contrast, St. Cloud State University’s co-teaching model prepares cooperating teachers and their teacher candidates to work collaboratively. Cooperating teachers and teacher candidates begin with training that identifies common co-teaching language, offers information about roles and expectations for the experience, and, most important, provides knowledge of seven co-teaching strategies and how to co-plan to co-teach. Pairs are brought together to get to know each other and begin to establish a professional relationship early in the student-teaching experience. This practice is supported by Friend who says, “Expecting preservice teachers to learn about collaboration simply by being together in schools is not enough; proximity is a nec-

Student Teaching

was finding it increasingly difficult to secure high-quality student-teaching placements. St. Cloud was not alone: With increased national testing and teacher accountability, many teacher preparation programs were struggling to find enough teachers to host teacher candidates. In 2003, with the help of a five-year Teacher Quality Enhancement Partnership grant, St. Cloud decided to explore how we could strengthen the student-teaching experience with a co-teaching model.

Co-teaching commonly takes the form of two teachers—a general educator and a special educator—working together to deliver instruction (Cook

except for agreed-on times when the teacher candidate would take over the classroom and teach solo. Most cooperating teachers assumed that teacher candidates came to the program with the preparation they needed to plan lessons, utilize a variety of instructional strategies, and manage the classroom—they simply needed to practice these techniques with real students under the direction of a certified teacher. Cooperating teachers expected teacher candidates to develop their solo lesson plans in isolation, with little conversation about curriculum or scope and sequence. The pair rarely questioned the power dif-

ferential that existed between them. In contrast, St. Cloud State University’s co-teaching model prepares cooperating teachers and their teacher candidates to work collaboratively. Cooperating teachers and teacher candidates begin with training that identifies common co-teaching language, offers information about roles and expectations for the experience, and, most important, provides knowledge of seven co-teaching strategies and how to co-plan to co-teach. Pairs are brought together to get to know each other and begin to establish a professional relationship early in the student-teaching experience. This practice is supported by Friend who says, “Expecting preservice teachers to learn about collaboration simply by being together in schools is not enough; proximity is a nec-

essary but insufficient condition for collaboration” (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002, p. 4). Teacher candidates are actively engaged from the first day. Our motto is, “Off your seat and on your feet!” Both teachers are involved in every aspect of planning and delivering instruction. Cooperating teachers provide modeling and coaching, explicitly sharing rationales for their instructional, curricular, and management decisions. They give teacher candidates time to develop and practice all aspects of teaching, with support. As the experience progresses, pairs seamlessly alternate

between leading and assisting with planning, instructing, and assessing.

Pairs are not expected to use co-teaching for every lesson, but rather to determine when specific co-teaching strategies would be most useful in assisting student learning. Of course, cooperating teachers also leave the classroom at times, allowing teacher candidates to demonstrate they can handle a classroom on their own.

A Look at Two Classrooms

Let's consider two classrooms, one that uses a traditional approach to student teaching and one that uses a co-teaching model.

In a traditional 3rd grade classroom, the cooperating teacher has set up a small desk in the corner of the room for the teacher candidate. The cooperating teacher has carefully divided the schedule into chunks of teaching time—times when she will teach and times when she will assign the teacher candidate to teach.

Early in the experience, the cooperating teacher asks the teacher candidate to observe. In week three, she gives the teacher candidate the responsibility for teaching math. She provides the objectives for the week and other background materials and asks the teacher candidate to submit his lesson plans before each lesson. The teacher candidate takes the materials home at night, diligently studying them and writing lesson plans that he turns in to the cooperating teacher. The cooperating teacher approves the lesson plans, and the teacher candidate steps in for the first time and takes over teaching math to the entire class.

As the weeks progress, the cooperating teacher hands over additional responsibility to the teacher candidate, and she often leaves the classroom to allow the candidate to teach on his own. Eventually, the teacher candidate

takes over all responsibilities, and the classroom teacher steps aside (either in or outside of the classroom) for days at a time. At the end of a designated number of weeks, the teacher candidate will be “done” and will hand the classroom back to the cooperating teacher.

Now let's look at a co-taught 3rd grade classroom. The cooperating teacher has provided two teacher work stations, which she and the teacher candidate use interchangeably. The cooperating teacher leads the instruction, but on the first day, she

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asks the teacher candidate to teach a math station (which is already organized and set up). The candidate takes a few minutes to review the station, and during the course of the lesson she has the opportunity to work with all students.

At the end of the day, the pair sits down to plan out the next few days. The cooperating teacher explains what lessons have been taught most recently and what's coming up. The pair decides to use stations again the next day for math and to use parallel teaching for a social studies lesson. The cooperating teacher has already planned out each of these lessons, but she carefully explains the thinking behind each one to the teacher candidate.

As the weeks progress, the two teachers continue to sit down a few times each week to plan and discuss which lessons they will co-teach. The teacher candidate gradually begins

to assume more responsibility for planning, instruction, and assessment. The pair talk through ideas, and the teacher candidate then uses these ideas to write out a formal lesson plan. As the teacher candidate takes over the lead in planning the lessons, she determines what role the cooperating teacher and other adults in the classroom will have. Although the teacher candidate has opportunities to teach alone, both teachers are actively involved in most lessons, establishing an environment that meets the needs of as many students as possible.

Has this new student-teaching model been effective? Data collected at St. Cloud demonstrate that elementary students in co-taught student-teaching classrooms performed better on state assessments in math and reading than did students in classrooms using a more traditional student-teaching approach. The co-taught students also outperformed students in classrooms where there was no student teacher (Bacharach et al., 2010). In addition, cooperating teachers, teacher candidates, and learners overwhelmingly identified positive benefits of the co-teaching model (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2010; Heck & Bacharach, 2010).

How to Transform Your Student-Teaching Program

Either the university or the school district can initiate the move to a co-teaching model of student teaching. Most often, the university initiates and implements the model. However, we have worked with several large school districts that believe so strongly in co-teaching that they will only allow a placement in their schools if participants agree to co-teach. These districts provide training and support, not only for their teachers, but also for all teacher candidates and university



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supervisors who are placed in their district.

We believe that a co-teaching model of student teaching is best practice. Here are some keys to successful implementation that we learned in our journey to this model.

Develop a Strong Partnership

The co-teaching model of student teaching requires collaboration and strong communication. In the past, teacher-preparation institutions often made decisions about student-teaching programs and protocol without the input of their school partners; in contrast, the co-teaching model requires the agreement of both entities. The cooperating teachers and teacher candidates must also agree to embrace co-teaching practices.

If some teachers are reluctant to

adopt this new model, you might want to start by identifying teacher leaders who are willing to give it a try and who can then become the ambassadors of co-teaching, encouraging others to join. Another idea is to start small, with one school or one licensure program, producing positive results that will support the creation of a strong, self-perpetuating program.

Provide Preparation and Training

The success of the co-teaching model depends on the preparation of all members of the partnership. Provide all cooperating teachers, teacher candidates, and university supervisors with foundational information, including why they will be co-teaching and the strategies they can use. School and university administration and faculty must also be knowledgeable and sup-

portive of the co-teaching model.

Co-teaching is not a one-shot professional development experience. You cannot simply train your participants and be done; it's an ongoing initiative. Certainly, as your program matures, your partnership will need less attention. Often the teacher candidates who co-taught go on to become cooperating teachers themselves. But partnerships will continue to have new teachers and new administrators who need to be prepared in co-teaching. Be sure to provide timely, ongoing refresher courses and updates for university and school personnel.

Select and Define Methods

Each university-school partnership must first define co-teaching. This is the definition used by St. Cloud State and its school partners: Two teachers



STUDENT TEACHERS BRING OUT THE JOY OF TEACHING

We have a great program with the University of New Hampshire. Education students do a fifth year, which gives them a master's degree, and they spend the entire fifth year with a teacher in the classroom. I've probably had 10 or 12 interns.

I love working with these student teachers. They see things with an energy and enthusiasm, with a joy and a passion that we sometimes lose when we're in the classroom year after year. The minute they walk in, they're so excited to be there. We can tap into that enthusiasm and joy for working with kids.

Often I'll say to a student teacher working with me, "Tell me what you notice. How are the kids reacting to this? Tell me what you think I could be doing differently." There's constant conversation back and forth. So many times teachers are isolated; we have nobody to talk to before that next group of 25 students comes in.

Of course, it can be challenging to let go of things you've held onto for years and look at a fresh approach. But once you have trust in that other person, it's easier to let go, and then you can learn a lot. For example, one thing I learned from a student teacher was the benefit of writing in front of the students. She didn't hesitate to start to draft a piece of writing in front of them so they could see her thinking process. Although I had often talked about that being a valuable thing to do, in the time constraints we had, I wasn't paying enough attention to it. I wasn't letting the kids see that writing is a messy process. But when she did this in front of the students, I could see in their reactions how helpful it was for them.

My advice to co-teachers? Listen, listen, listen. Talk to each other constantly. Gain confidence in that person. Approach each other as colleagues. Student teachers may be new to the classroom, but they are colleagues. They want to do the best for kids; you want to do the best for kids. So how can you help each other make that happen?

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(a cooperating teacher and a teacher candidate) working together with groups of students, sharing the planning, organization, delivery, and assessment of instruction, as well as the physical space.

Next, the partnership must identify the co-teaching strategies it wants teachers to use. St. Cloud State University has adapted and modified the co-teaching methods put forth by Cook and Friend (1995) to come up with the following collection of strategies:

One Teach, One Observe. One teacher has primary responsibility for instruction while the other collects specific observational information—for example, the types of questions the instructing teacher asks or the amount of time students are on task. Whether conducted by the teacher candidate or the cooperating teacher, observation is not intended to make judgments, but to provide data on what's happening in the classroom to guide future lessons.

One Teach, One Assist. One teacher has primary instructional responsibility while the other helps students with their work, monitors behavior, or corrects assignments, often lending a voice to students or groups who hesitate to participate. This strategy supports classroom management because students get their questions answered faster and behavior problems are addressed without stopping instruction.

Station Teaching. Groups of students rotate among stations, some teacher-led and some for independent work. This is an excellent way to allow teacher candidates to teach a minilesson multiple times to small groups, increasing their confidence, while the cooperating teacher is also actively engaged with students. Other adults (paraprofessionals, special educators, and Title I teachers) can also lead stations.

Parallel Teaching. Each teacher instructs half of the students, both addressing the same content. The greatest benefit of this method is the reduction of the student-teacher ratio. Place students facing their teacher with their backs to the other teacher to reduce distractions. Before the lesson, discuss pacing, voice, and noise levels.

Supplemental Teaching. One teacher works with students at their expected grade level, while the other teacher works with students who need remediation or extension. The student groupings should be flexible and should be based on student performance on a specific assessment. Both teachers should work with each of the students at some time, making sure that the teacher candidate doesn't always work with the students who are struggling or advanced.

Alternative or Differentiated Teaching. Teachers divide the class into two groups and teach the same information using two different approaches. For example, one teacher might teach the larger group as they make predictions about what

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will happen next in a fiction text they are studying; the other teacher may teach the same skill to a smaller group of students who need extra support, incorporating more visual prompts and movement into the lesson. Both teachers need to be clear on the intended outcomes of the lesson; students should achieve the same objective using different methods.

Team Teaching. Both teachers are actively involved in the lesson with no prescribed division of authority. Both teachers share the instruction, are free to interject information, and are available to assist students and answer questions. For example, both instructors share in reading a story so the students are hearing two alternating voices. The cooperating teacher discusses specific events in the story while the teacher candidate shares a map or picture illustrating each event. It's a good idea to team teach a lesson early in the student-teaching experience, thus encouraging students to perceive the teacher candidate as a "real" teacher.

Other university-school partnerships may create different definitions or strategies; what's crucial is that you establish a common language and set of strategies.

Ensure Time for Co-Planning

Simply stated, if you don't co-plan, you won't co-teach. Co-teaching is not walking into the room and saying "Hey, what are we doing today?"

Administrators must help cooperating teachers and teacher candidates find time—a minimum of an hour a week—to co-plan. Cooperating teachers and teacher candidates must hold this time sacred. Some schools provide release from other duties to do this (for example, by excusing cooperating teachers from lunch duty). Other schools form co-teaching professional learning communities.

Adopt Co-Teaching as an Intentional Structure

Many educators examining co-teaching in student teaching may say, "That's the way I've always done student teaching." It's true that many cooperating teachers already use approaches that resemble co-teaching; what's important is intentionality through the use of common language, planning, and implementing of specific co-teaching strategies. Once the partnership has committed to co-teaching, it becomes the structure that guides the experience. Everyone involved has the same expectations.

An Institutional Shift

Change is hard. Moving from a more traditional student-teaching model to a co-teaching model takes time. To lead such a change, school administrators must be supportive and knowledgeable about the practice. The university must have key personnel who lead the initiative; it can't be one faculty members' pet project, but rather must

be an institutional shift in practice led by a multidisciplinary team. Although difficult, the change from a more traditional model to a co-teaching model of student teaching will provide a stronger, more powerful learning experience for everyone. ■

Authors' note: For more information about St. Cloud State University's co-teaching train-the-trainer workshop and additional resources to help universities and school districts implement this model, see www.stcloudstate.edu/soe/coteaching.

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