

2015-06

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Clancy, Tracey L.

University of Calgary

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Clancy, T.L., Rosenau, P., Ferreira, C., Lock, J., Rainsbury, J. "Modeling Co-Teaching to Inform Professional Practice" (2015). In Preciado Babb, P., Takeuchi, M., & Lock, J. (Eds.).

Proceedings of the IDEAS: Designing Responsive Pedagogy Conference, pp. 72-81. Calgary, Canada: Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

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# **MODELING CO-TEACHING TO INFORM PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE**

Tracey L. Clancy, Patricia Rosenau, Carla Ferreira, Jennifer Lock, Jacqueline Rainsbury

*University of Calgary*

*Co-teaching in higher education provides an environment conducive to developing leadership capacity in undergraduate nursing students. A mixed method research design was developed to explore how the complexity of the co-teaching experience influences leadership development of nursing students enrolled in the 'Nurse as Educator' course. The inquiry was guided by the question, what impact does co-teaching in a nurse education course have on the development of leadership in professional practice? Initial findings from the first of research are shared in relation to examining attributes of co-teaching, strengths and challenges, as well as how the experience of co-teaching has influenced student understanding of leadership in professional practice.*

Keywords: Co-teaching; Professional practice; Leadership

## **INTRODUCTION**

The scholarship of co-teaching in higher education is discussed, considering the advantages and the qualities that inform its teaching practice. An examination of the complexity of the co-teaching experience is shared, along with how this influences student understanding of leadership in professional practice. From an ongoing two-year research study, initial findings in relation to co-teaching, transformational leadership, and professional practice development are discussed.

2015. In Preciado Babb, Takeuchi, and Lock (Eds.). *Proceedings of the IDEAS: Designing Responsive Pedagogy*, pp. 72-81. Werklund School of the Education, University of Calgary.

## **Review of the literature**

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 both pedagogically and professionally (Ferguson & Wilson, 2011).

Co-teaching is complex. 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). In the creation of the relationship there needs to be intentionality and purposefulness. Laughlin, Nelson, and Donaldson (2011) argued that co-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 cannot be assumed that co-teaching or team teaching relationships occur naturally or evolve in a healthy manner. According to Yanamandram and Noble (2005), successful co-teaching collaboration requires an investment of time and effort. Drawing from Laughlin et al.’s (2011) work, the following should be considered in advance of engaging in co-teaching:

- 1) Discussing benefits of the approach for co-teachers and their professional community;
- 2) Defining partners’ roles, exploring expectations to support consistent practice;
- 3) Negotiating effective pedagogical approaches for specific content and context;
- 4) Establishing strategies to manage challenges and conflicts; and
- 5) Cultivating an understanding of co-teaching in higher education.

As such, it is important to remember the co-teaching relationship is dynamic and that co-instructors need to be responsive to external stimuli and not assume what worked before will work again. Co-teaching involves a complex relationship that requires intentionality in learning to react and respond to each other and to the class. The scholarship of co-teaching reveals essential qualities that are required to develop and to sustain a healthy, effective co-teaching relationship.

### **Advantages of co-teaching in higher education**

Co-teaching involves “messiness” (Plank, 2011, p. 2) that “moves beyond the familiar and predictable and creates an environment of uncertainty, dialogue, and discovery” (Plank, 2011, p. 3). Bacharach, Heck and Dahlberg (2008) reported that the co-teaching experience supported the utilization of different teaching strategies, allowed the pairs to be more reflective with regard to their teaching given they negotiate decisions with each other, helped to enhance their teaching practice, and “provided an energizing opportunity for faculty to renew their passion for their profession” (p. 15).

Co-teaching provides an opportunity for the instructors to model effective practices of this approach to teaching to their students. According to Harris and Harvey (2000), co-teaching “provides the opportunity to model different ways of teaching and responding to conflict in the classroom” (p. 90). From Stang and Lyons’ (2008) research with pre-service teachers, all students in their study “reported that the act of observing faculty co-teach was the most valuable learning tool” (p. 191). Yanamandram and Noble (2005) examined student experiences and perceptions of co-teaching and their findings revealed that students’ motivation and interest in the subject were fostered as a result of being co-taught. In addition, they experienced an enhanced learning environment that helped them to deal with different situations and consider the validity of

numerous views. Further, Plank (2011) argued that students observing “their teachers learn from each other and even disagree with each other models for students how scholars and informed citizens within a community of learning can navigate a complex and uncertain world” (p. 5). This modeling within the formal learning environment helps students to appreciate the nature of the collaboration required of them in their professional workplace settings.

### **Relationship between co-teaching and transformational leadership**

Heller et al. (2004) suggested that generally, nurses are not adequately prepared for the role of leader during their nursing education. Evidence supports the use of transformational leadership as an effective framework for advancing nursing leadership and the notion that leadership in nurses can be developed through educational activities, modeling and practicing leadership. Further, those opportunities to observe leadership skills lead to great self-efficacy in nurses’ leadership behaviours (Curtis, De Vries, & Sheerin, 2011b).

Transformational leadership is described as a leadership style that aims to inspire others to develop and use effective leadership characteristics (Burns, 1978). Transformational leadership has been characterized as challenging the process, modelling the way, sharing a bond with and inspiring followers, and being able to empower others through a shared vision and trust (Curtis et al., 2011a; Kouzes & Posner, 1995, 2002). DeSimone (1996) described transformational leaders as change agents who believe in people and can deal with complexity and uncertainty. This leadership requires an appreciation for being dynamic and responsive to complexity and uncertainty; it involves a relationship and the notion of mutuality, having a shared vision, and trust. Adopting a transformational leadership style is vital for nurses since it encourages change and allows for the recognition of areas in which change is needed (Pickerill, 2014). All of these qualities identified

relative to transformational leadership are also embodied within an effective co-teaching collaboration.

Several studies provide evidence of how co-teaching influences the development of nurses' leadership in professional practice. It was found that when students were taught by more than one instructor in a communication skills course that the teachers acted as professional role models (Minardi & Riley, 1991). Mislant (2011) found that nursing students responded positively to being co-taught; specifically noting that it challenged and promoted their learning and increased teacher credibility as they acted as nursing role models. Dumas (1999) in a Canadian study concluded that the strategy of co-teaching prepares nursing students to face different perspectives in professional values and it expands their knowledge base. From such studies, it is evident that further inquiry is needed to examine how the experience of co-teaching influences student understanding of leadership in professional practice.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The first of a three-phase mixed method research was conducted in fall 2014. The purpose of the study was to explore the influence of co-teaching on the development of leadership in professional practice, and to investigate the benefits and challenges of co-teaching in higher education. The following research question guided the study: What impact does co-teaching in a nurse education course have on the development of leadership in professional practice? Students enrolled in a *Nurse as Educator* course along with their instructors were invited to participate in the study.

For the purpose of this paper, the data shared is from the individual interviews with students (N= 4) and a focus group interview with instructors (N=2). In the interview, a series of questions engaged participants in exploring their experience with co-teaching and how it influenced student learning,

the qualities of co-teaching, the strengths and challenges of co-teaching, and how being co-taught influenced student practice and development as a leader. Thematic analysis of the interview data occurred.

## **DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

From the student interviews, it was evident that they found value in their co-taught learning experience. The students appreciated the partnership that was modeled given the differences of backgrounds, experiences and areas of expertise of the instructors. They acknowledged such key attributes of learning in a co-taught environment as: 1) each instructor brings her own experiences and perspectives to the teaching; 2) instructors have a strong understanding of course outcomes; and 3) instructors are respectful and are supportive of student learning.

From their experiences with co-teaching both in this course and other courses, the students identified strengths of co-teaching, along with challenges. A strength that resonated was the importance of having more than one point of view to explore the content and experiences, a finding discovered in several other studies (Dumas, 1999; Floyd, 1975; Kerridge, Kyle, & Marks-Maran, 2009; Yanamandram & Noble, 2005). Students also identified challenges such as: the asynchrony between the instructors; the need to balance two different personalities; the impact of differing philosophical approaches to teaching; the potential to create confusion for students; and the issue of one instructor over shadowing the other in terms of leadership. Previous studies have also noted the challenges for students in instances of personality conflicts between instructors and/or where they contradict one another (Dumas, 1999; Floyd, 1975; Minardi & Riley, 1991).

They were asked how being co-taught has influenced their development as a leader. From their responses, four key ideas emerged. First, through the course experience students were developing

confidence in being leaders and were developing leadership skills. Second, they were able to establish where they are in terms of their leadership and to reflect on strengths and weaknesses. Third, there was the development of an appreciation that leadership can occur in groups or as a pair and not always alone. Fourth, they were gaining a greater understanding of the fluid nature of the leadership role. As noted by one student, “As an influence on me being a leader it definitely opens up my options on how I approach leadership in general.”

The instructors revealed they had established a healthy co-teaching rapport and purposefully designed assignments that engaged students in developing their professional practice. The instructors also shared that they modelled effective co-teaching. This modeling of effective co-teaching provides students with an example of how to enter into professional relationships and manage differences in values and opinions while maintaining mutual respect and openness (Dumas, 1999; Mislang, 2011). When asked about the influence they had on the leadership capability of their students they noted the following qualities of co-teaching. First, co-instructors like good leaders need to know when to lead and when to follow. Second, there is an aspect of humility that needs to be in place in terms of being open to recognize one’s limitations both in co-teaching and in leadership. Third, verbal and the non-verbal communication play a key role in co-teaching and in leadership. Fourth, the need for authenticity honouring who you are and the role you have, influences the co-teaching relationship as well as the leadership relationship. Fifth, there is a need for humour in the roles of co-teachers and leaders.

The instructors’ shared the following key words and phrases which best capture the heart of co-teaching: 1) trust; 2) willingness to learn; 3) open to vulnerability; 4) authenticity; and 5) relationships. These attributes speak to the qualities associated with transformational leadership which requires an appreciation of the need to be dynamic and responsive to the complexity within

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the classroom, and involves a relationship based on mutuality, having a shared vision, and establishing trust.

## **CONCLUSION**

These initial findings indicate the impact of co-teaching on student learning. Further, it reveals how effective co-teaching practice role models the qualities associated with transformational leadership and enacting relationships in professional practice. What is less clear is how these students will transfer their co-teaching experience and translate an understanding of the qualities associated with effective co-teaching and transformational leadership to inform their own professional practice.

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