

Peer-to-Peer Co-teaching: Idea to Implementation

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This article outlines one university's move toward implementing a co-teaching field experience, with pre-service teacher candidates acting as peer-to-peer co-teachers. In order to better meet the needs of pre-service teacher candidates (PTCs) and continually develop their ability to grow as reflective PTCs, two teacher educators applied co-teaching strategies in a field experience setting by having students teach as co-teaching pairs. The developed model includes ways to gather feedback during co-taught lessons in an effort to help the co-teaching pair be more reflective on their teaching and set future goals. Initial data collection shows positive results for participating pre-service teachers.

It can be challenging finding field experience placements with quality mentor teachers. Often, universities rely on administrators to provide a list of willing mentor teachers in which to place pre-service teacher candidates (PTCs). Field experience supervisors often have little say, or preference, in the grade-level or mentor teachers in which PTCs are placed. The hope is that the field placement provides PTCs with an experience that models good teaching. As a university, the field experiences we provide help shape (positively or negatively) the development of PTCs.

Like other educator preparation programs, our university strives to provide meaningful field experiences. In our EC-6 certification program, PTCs are required to complete more than 250 hours of field experience observations, which include planning and teaching a variety of lessons. As one of our field experience sites, we are fortunate to have access to a K-5 university charter school in which faculty work closely with mentor teachers. Together, faculty and mentor teachers are able to provide meaningful experiences that model the constructivist philosophy of our department and college

of education. Having a close working relationship with mentor teachers allows us, as field supervisors, an assurance that our PTCs are gaining not only valuable experiences, but also opportunities to interact with students in a constructivist setting.

While alleviating the issue of quality field placement, we are faced with another challenge. Accommodating up to 70 PTCs across 12 mentor teacher classrooms, creates a situation where multiple PTCs must be placed with one mentor teacher. In such a field placement, PTCs spend a great deal of time not only observing the mentor teacher, but also their peers, as each must teach, in order to fulfill all requirements of the course. It was because of this environment we began to explore new ways to engage PTCs in the activities of teaching rather than passive observation. After talking to colleagues and reviewing the literature, the idea of co-teaching came to the forefront as a viable option in the placement of numerous PTCs within a single mentor's classroom.

Co-teaching

The idea of co-teaching dates back to the 1960's and 1970's and was thought by many to be an example of progressive education. From its inception, co-teaching was advanced as a means of modifying instruction for a more diverse student population (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). Over the years, co-teaching has taken on the form of a service delivery approach for students with special needs who can benefit from general education curriculum (Cook & Friend, 1995). In this model, co-teachers include the general education teacher and the special education professional working as a teaching pair. In 2013-2014, there were 6.5 million children, approximately 13 percent, of all public school students who received special education services (Kena et. al., 2016). Co-teaching has been a model used for a number of years in the special education setting as a response to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Under IDEA, Individualized Educational Programs (IEP) are required to state how students with disabilities will be involved, and progress, in the general education curriculum. This requires collaboration among educators, including special education professionals and general education teachers, and co-teaching provides a model for educators to collaboratively work together to meet the needs of the child and adhere to federal mandates.

Today, co-teaching is viewed as a model of planning and instruction to reach *all* learners, not just students with special needs. The model in which co-teachers collaboratively plan and teach can vary. Additionally, the educators who take on the role of co-teachers can

also vary. Cook & Friend (1995) describe co-teaching as “Two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single space”. Each co-teacher brings different skill sets and experiences to the classroom. These co-teachers supplement each other, rather than act interchangeably (Friend, 2014). Villa, Thousand, & Nevin (2013) suggest that co-teachers engage in a cooperative process of face-to-face interaction, interdependence, performance, as well as monitoring and processing of interpersonal skills, and individual accountability.

After co-teaching relationships are formed, there are a variety of models in which co-teaching can be delivered. Cook & Friend (1995) have identified six approaches to collaborative teaching which include:

1. *Station Teaching*. Students are divided into groups with each teacher delivering part of the lesson at a station. Independent work typically occurs in one of the stations. Students rotate through all stations, allowing teachers to work with all students;
2. *Parallel Teaching*. Students are divided into two groups. Each teacher works with a teacher. The teachers may present information in different ways or they may choose to present the same information;
3. *Alternative Teaching*. One teacher works with the majority of students, while the other teacher instructs a small group to reteach, enrich, assess, pre-teach, or another identified purpose;
4. *Teaming*. Students remain in one group, while the teachers co-instruct throughout the lesson;

5. *One-Teach, One-Assist.* Student remain in one group, with one teacher leading instruction while the other teacher briefly interacts with students to focus attention, answer questions, further explain concepts, and so on; and
6. *One Teach, One Observe.* One teacher leads instruction while the other teacher collects specific data pertaining to one or more children.

While each of the six approaches may look slightly different, at the core is a model of collaboration amongst educators to meet the needs of all children. A meta synthesis of co-teaching conducted by Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie (2007), found that administrators, teachers, and students perceive co-teaching to be beneficial socially and academically. Additionally, the meta synthesis revealed that teachers identified sufficient planning time, co-teacher training, and compatibility, as essential elements of successful co-teaching partnerships.

Preparing for Change

To learn more about co-teaching we attended a Co-Teaching: Train the Trainer Workshop during summer of 2016. The training was provided by The Academy for Co-Teaching & Collaboration through St. Cloud State University and TWH Consulting and provided insight into the six co-teaching models originally developed by Cook & Friend (1995). The workshop prepared us to facilitate training in the area of co-teaching between a pre-service teacher candidate (PTC) and mentor teacher during their student teaching placement. Bacharach, Heck, and Dahlberg (2008)

describe a co-teaching experience through an educator preparation program as one in which the cooperating teacher and PTC collaboratively plan and deliver instruction. However, ensuring that all PTC's receive the opportunity to participate in a field experience placement that incorporates co-teaching can be challenging due to a variety of constraints, including convenience of placement and availability. In a non-co-teaching field placement, the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate typically have little opportunity to collaborate or build a relationship (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2010).

While we found the co-teacher training designed to pair a PTC with a mentor teacher to be beneficial, we were left wondering how to facilitate the idea of co-teaching with one mentor teacher and multiple PTCs being placed in a single classroom. A review of literature indicated that there is little to no research available on the use of co-teaching as a model for preparing PTCs prior to their internship placement. To resolve our challenge, we intentionally acted as co-teachers to identify areas in our field experience that align with the co-teaching models. Through this process, we designed a model of co-teaching to fit within the requirements of our educator preparation program.

To prepare students for a peer-to-peer co-teaching field experience, we designed a co-teaching orientation for PTCs enrolled in our field experience. The orientation was co-taught by both of us, providing an overview of the co-teaching models. Our field experience also includes a one-hour lab that meets once a week. We decided to conduct our labs together, as co-teachers, to showcase the different models of co-teaching. Each training, orientation and individual lab

class, was facilitated by both field supervisors, using one or more of the six different models of co-teaching. Modeling of the co-teaching methods allowed each PTC to participate in the co-teaching models prior to the planning and implementing the components in their field placement.

Planning and Implementation.

To address the placement of multiple PTCs in a single classroom, we decided to let PTCs in our field experience course self-select a peer to form a co-teaching pair. These pairs would act as co-teachers for the duration of the semester, while teaching the required lessons through the six models of co-teaching. Each PTC was responsible for teaching their own required lessons as the lead-teacher, while also serving as a co-teacher during their partners' required lessons, immediately doubling the number of lessons for which they were able to be actively involved.

While one co-teaching pair delivered instruction, we were still faced with an additional number of co-teaching pairs that were not involved in the lesson in any way. For example, in a classroom where three co-teaching peers were placed, a co-taught lesson would leave two co-teaching pairs (4 PTCs) still in the role of a passive observer. While a co-taught lesson was taking place, using any of the models, we realized that we could also apply the One Teach, One Observe model with the additional "observers" in a more constructive way. For example, a co-teaching pair might be using Station Teaching to deliver their content, while the additional peers in the classroom were in a One Teach, One Observe model. In this instance, the "One Teach" would be the co-teaching pair in Station Teaching, and the "One Observe" would be the additional peers in the classroom.

With the two models simultaneously in place, we wanted to focus observations in a way that would allow the additional observers to provide meaningful feedback to the co-teaching pair. We designed and implemented feedback forms that gave specific data on the lesson related to content, pedagogy, and management. These forms were completed by the mentor teacher, field supervisor, and any additional PTCs not part of the co-teaching team. At the end of each lesson, all feedback forms were given to the lead teacher to provide data related to the lesson. Each lead PTC was asked to provide a written reflection of their own lesson performance using peer feedback data as evidence for areas of strength and weakness and then set goals for future teaching.

The following day, the PTC led a meeting with the field supervisor using their written reflection and peer feedback. The purpose of the meeting was to allow the PTC to discuss their understanding of their performance based on the data collected. When discussing feedback, the lead teachers' reflection, all peer feedback, the field supervisor's comments, and notes from the mentor teacher were used as discussion points to impact PTCs future teaching. Previous set goals were evaluated for progress and goals for the next lesson were set by the PTC and field experience supervisor collaboratively.

Initial Data Collection & Analysis. Upon completion of a peer-to-peer co-teaching field experience placement, PTCs were asked to complete a *Co-Teaching Survey* to assess their perception of co-teaching. Twenty-two participants completed the Co-teaching survey, adapted from the Academy for Co-teaching and Collaboration (2015) at St. Cloud State University. Participants

self-reported their responses using a four point Likert scale with additional questions allowing for open-ended responses.

Benefits of Co-teaching. An analysis of the *Co-Teaching Survey* revealed a variety of experiences related to co-teaching. At the end of the field placement, participants were asked to the degree to which they found value in each co-teaching model. The majority of PTCs rated each model as either moderately valuable or very valuable (Table 1). Four of the co-teaching models, were perceived to be very valuable by at least 63.6% of participants. All but one participant (4.5%) found One Teach, One Observe to be at least slightly valuable.

Co-teaching Model	Very Valuable	Moderately Valuable	Slightly Valuable	Not Valuable
Parallel Teaching	27.3	68.2	4.5	0
Team Teaching	68.2	27.3	4.5	0
One Teach, One Observe	54.5	27.3	13.6	4.5
One Teach, One Assist	77.3	13.6	9.1	0
Station Teaching	68.2	22.7	9.1	0
Differentiated/Alternative	63.6	36.4	0	0

Open-ended responses revealed beliefs about the benefits of co-teaching for K-5 students. All 22 participants (100%), acknowledged the ability to meet students needs quickly as a great benefit. One PTC stated, “Having a co-teacher allows for more one on one time with students.” Another stated that utilizing a co-teacher “... benefits the students in several ways including making the most of the learning time.” The ability to provide individual student attention was perceived to be a great benefit by 91% of participants. One PTC acknowledged, “It was nice to have another person that the students could ask for help.” Another PTC agreed, “It was also great to have

another pair of eyes ready to answer questions or manage behavior.” All participants rated the following as having either great or moderate benefits to K-5 students:

- more individual attention for students;
- students experience two perspectives and distinct teaching styles;
- students experience greater academic growth;
- teachers are more engaged;
- teachers are able to build off of each other;
- student’s needs are met quicker; and
- students feel more connected to school.

In addition to recognizing the benefits to K-5 students, participants were also asked to rate benefits of co-teaching to teacher candidates (Table 2). Of the statements evaluated in the survey, PTCs found great benefit for co-teaching in the areas of increased collaboration skills (91%). One PTC stated, “The most beneficial part of co-teaching was collaborating with my co-teacher. This gave me more confidence for the future when I become a teacher and have to plan with the teachers on my team.”

Co-teaching Model	Great Benefit	Moderate Benefit	Little Benefit	No Benefit
Increased Collaboration Skills	90.9	4.5	4.5	0
Improved Classroom Management Skills	81.8	13.6	4.5	0
Received more exposure to experienced teachers	77.3	13.6	9.1	0
Gained confidence through co-planning process	72.7	13.6	13.6	0
Developed a deeper understanding of the curriculum through co-planning	68.2	18.2	9.1	4.5
Had more questions to ask questions/reflect	63.6	18.2	13.6	0
Taught more	77.3	22.7	0	0
Learned to facilitate and/or direct the efforts of other adults in the classroom	81.8	13.6	4.5	0

Another area of benefit to co-teachers was found in the area of improved classroom management skills (82%). Participants indicated keeping students on task and help managing the classroom, as evidence of co-teaching related to classroom management. Additional benefits of co-teaching to PTCs include the ability to direct the efforts of other adults in the classroom (82%). One PTC stated, “I liked the fact that [co-teaching] challenged me to work with and around another teacher. It also made me realize how other people can interpret your lessons differently unless you explain it to them.” One co-teacher came to the realization that co-teachers could be used for their expertise. When asked what wisdom you would like to pass on to future peer-to-peer co-teachers, a PTC stated, “Use your co-teacher! They are there to help you and make your lesson successful! Don’t give them busy work but use them appropriately.” For some, reaching the understanding that each co-teacher brings a different set of skills to the partnership is a perceived benefit. However, not capitalizing on each others abilities, particularly during the planning process, was a perceived drawback for others.

Drawbacks to Co-teaching

The co-teaching survey also provided opportunities for participants to identify any barriers or drawbacks to teaching with a co-teacher. Additionally, participants were asked about the most challenging aspect of their co-teaching experience. Most notably, 31.8 percent of participants indicated that they were not provided enough solo teaching time due to co-teaching. Yet, none of the participants commented about a lack of individual teaching time in regards to

their most challenging aspect of the co-teaching experience.

Another perceived drawback to co-teaching (27.3%) was the amount of time required for co-planning lessons. Co-planning was mentioned frequently as an aspect that was most challenging in the co-teaching process. An underlying theme related to the challenges of co-planning included “lack of time”. Another theme related to the challenges of co-planning included communication between co-teachers. One PTC stated, “Sometimes, my co-teacher misunderstood what I needed of her so her part didn't get done as planned.” Another PTC expressed, “I think the most difficult part of this experience was understanding the lesson that my co-teacher planned the day of the lesson. It was kind of difficult for me at some points to remember exactly what I needed to do and when I needed to do it.” PTCs acknowledged some drawbacks to their experience co-teaching, however, there seemed to be far more benefits associated with their experience in a peer-to-peer co-teaching placement.

Looking Ahead

One obstacle to successful implementation of the co-teaching experience was co-planning, which could address the majority of drawbacks indicated by PTCs. The challenges of co-planning are not exclusive to our field experience (Scruggs, Mastropieri, McDuffie, 2007). The survey revealed that some PTCs met prior to the execution of the lesson to discuss the role that the co-teacher would play. This caused the co-teacher to only carry out duties assigned by the lead teacher, which may have limited their role in the lesson. For example, if a co-teacher was “assigned”

to work in a small group, they would not leave the small group to assist other students or attend to other teaching activities, even if it appeared the lead teacher could use additional support. In order to attempt to alleviate problems associated with co-planning, we are initiating several steps for future implementation.

First, to help facilitate ownership in each other's lessons, co-teachers will be assigned successive teaching opportunities to provide more reliance upon each other for planning and the execution of the lesson. We anticipate this to help PTCs feel more responsibility for student achievement, even for the lesson in which they are co-teaching. Second, to heighten understanding of their role as a co-teacher, weekly lab classes will include co-planning time while field supervisors are available to assist and guide co-teachers in planning and fully utilizing the expertise of the co-teacher throughout the lesson. Third, the lesson plan format will include a requirement to fully outline the role the co-teacher will fulfill in the lead teacher's lesson. Fourth, feedback meetings will include the co-teaching pair as part of the lesson reflection process rather than just the lead teacher. This will help ensure that each co-teacher fully understood their role in the lesson, and were provided an opportunity to reflect on the lesson outcomes.

Conclusion

The implementation of a peer-to-peer co-teaching experience has been beneficial for our educator preparation program in several ways. First, co-teaching has provided PTCs with more time to teach. In addition to their own teaching responsibilities as a lead teacher,

PTCs played an integral part in the planning, writing, teaching, and reflecting of lessons as a co-teacher for their partner. This allowed PTCs twice as many opportunities to be involved in the lesson cycle. Secondly, PTCs were given specific opportunities for peer collaboration throughout their field placement. These opportunities for collaboration centered around the real work of teachers, mimicking what might be expected of them as an in-service teacher. Finally, peer-to-peer co-teaching provided PTCs a platform to reflect on their own performance. By taking advantage of the One Teach, One Observe model of co-teaching, and the feedback forms during each PTC-led lesson, peers were given opportunity to not only receive feedback but also provide feedback to each other.

While initial results are positive for our educator preparation program from a university supervisor point-of-view, PTCs see benefits as well, as one indicated by stating, "I really liked co-teaching and it is something that I get to do in my future. I feel this gave me a lot of experience and believe more students should be given this opportunity." While adapting co-teaching to our field experience has been rather seamless, we recognize the experience could be strengthened by implementing allotted time for co-planning to take place throughout the semester. Our intent is for co-teachers to capitalize on the strengths that each possess and can bring to the lesson.

Co-teaching has allowed us to more specifically meet the needs of our educator preparation program and PTCs. As co-teaching within our field experience continues to evolve, it will be important to continually monitor and collect data to inform the direction of the

experience to ensure we are meeting the needs of all stakeholders, including the educator preparation program, pre-service teacher candidates, field placement sites, mentor teachers, and perhaps most importantly, the students. To this end, our university is committed to the continual development of our educator preparation program and PTCs. Initial data collection reveals co-teaching to be a model by which we are able to better prepare pre-service teacher candidates to meet the needs of their future students.

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