

Continuum of Collaboration *Little Steps for Little Feet*

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Abstract

This mini-article outlines a continuum of collaboration for faculty within a department of the same discipline. The goal of illustrating this continuum is showcase different stages of collaboration so that faculty members can assess where they are as a collective and consider steps to collaborate more. The separate points along a continuum of collaboration for faculty in the same discipline are described and then impressions, cautions, and thoughts related to opening up the “doors” of our classrooms to allow for collaboration are offered. Your faculty may be different, but we think you will find more commonalities than differences as you explore the continuum and our impressions.

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This mini-article outlines a continuum of collaboration for faculty within a department of the same discipline. The goal of illustrating this continuum is showcase different stages of collaboration so that faculty members can assess where they are as a collective and consider steps to collaborate more. If more collaboration is desired, then the steps taken as the University of Georgia (UGA) Recreation and Leisure Studies (RLST) may serve as a guide for progressing along the continuum. We start with a note of caution: Not everyone wants to collaborate, and some who do may need time to develop the skill sets necessary to help it progress smoothly. People with different temperaments and skill sets will be more or less open to collaboration regarding teaching, so assess your own motives and then proceed with those who want to collaborate. Faculty members at UGA RLST began the process of curriculum design by getting to know each other better to learn about our individual classroom styles, and to connect our content. There was risk and fear to overcome as we broke traditions and sought to improve the learning environment for the students. This mini-article describes the separate points along a continuum of collaboration for faculty in the same discipline and then offers (based on our experience) impressions, cautions, and thoughts related to opening up the “doors” of our classrooms to allow for collaboration within UGA RLST. Your faculty may be different, but we think you will find more commonalities than differences as you explore the continuum and our impressions.

Description of the Continuum of Collaboration within a Faculty Discipline

The continuum proposed (see Figure 1) is anchored on one end by individuals teaching separate courses with little to no knowledge about what the other instructor is doing and at the other by a unified teaching team delivering a blended-course model. In between are points that can be seen as separate points in the range or as steps that could take a group from the individual anchor point to the collaborative teaching team. We propose that the process of action may be similar, but the creativity that comes from the process will yield program specific innovations that will result in multiple destinations.

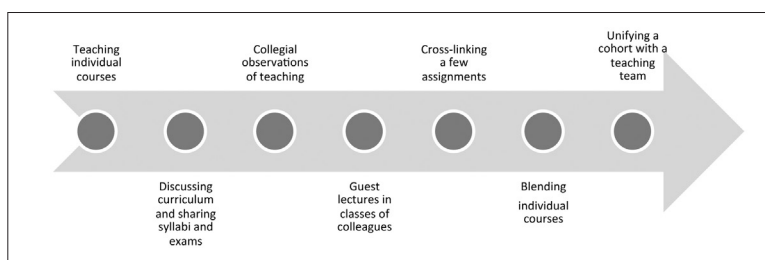


Figure 1. Continuum of Collaboration within a Faculty Discipline

Teaching individual courses. In most cases, faculty are assigned a set course load, and they teach that course basically how they think it will best work. Sometimes there is a teaching assistant, but in most cases, the instructor plans and delivers the course alone. Individual course content can be based on many factors such as accreditation standards, past syllabi, current issues and the instructor’s experience with the content. Faculty members often talk about the solitary nature of teaching (Boice,

2000) and the reluctance to reveal what is happening within the classroom to their peers. We may hear students make passing comments about other courses, but rarely know the full story or intent behind a specific item generating the criticism. Students can also hide in their assumption that faculty are not talking to each other. They see the overlap and are not often aware of the gap in information. Each course has its own grade and is delivered via thin layers across the semester timetable, so it can be challenging for students to see how the content relates to another course. In the “busy-ness” that is modern faculty life; this independence can be freeing and allows for last minute adaptation and scheduling. It feels like one of the hallmarks of academic freedom, so is rarely questioned as a means for conducting business.

Discussing curriculum and sharing syllabi and exams. One of the assumptions behind a body of knowledge is that there will be a cohesive delivery of content. Often in association with accreditation, there are charts or web-like grids that show the connections between courses. Most institutions have a syllabus repository, but it is rare for individual faculty to look at the other faculty syllabi within their own programs. It is more common to look at syllabi for similar course at other institutions when we seek ideas.

Some departments or emphasis areas have an instructors’ meeting at the beginning of each semester to share syllabi and help each other troubleshoot issues from the past semester. Individual autonomy remains, but the threads between classes are made more visible. Within RLST at UGA, as a step toward connecting as a major, two common documents, *Standards for Group Work* and *Standards for Written Work*, were developed and are available on the electronic classroom management system. The *Standards for Group Work* contains information about establishing group goals, sharing work standards with a guide to hold each other accountable and steps for remediation when a group member is not fulfilling agreed upon responsibilities. The *Standards of Written Work* is a basic primer of APA style and has some compromises to promote a more eco-friendly approach (double-sided printing, posting to electronic platforms, and no cover pages). By using these documents in all undergraduate courses in the major students can feel more confident they “know the rules” within the major, as opposed to dealing with different faculty handle similar situations in different manners. It helps students see that faculty are working together to create a standard for the profession as opposed to perceived individual agendas.

Collegial teaching observations. One way that faculty members often learn about each other’s classroom content and style is through teaching observations. At some institutions, it is part of the regular annual practice or part of tenure/post-tenure review. Even just one teaching observation (of one faculty member observing another) can yield insight about how content is used across courses. But setting up a systematic plan for a faculty member to observe/mentor the instructor who teaches the courses in curriculum sequence before and after “your” course is a powerful linkage with students and content. It also has the inherent benefit of prompting self-reflection, compliments, discussion and constructive feedback between colleagues. Most other professions (doctors, lawyers, etc.) have a formal level of peer review or have other people naturally in the room when jobs are performed.

Guest lectures in classes of colleagues. Guest lectures make it possible to recognize that each faculty member has different strengths and to find ways to connect across courses to showcase specialization and emphasize the collaborative nature of knowledge. Research presentations with relevant content for courses, public service connections and previous administrative experience all lend themselves to one-shot guest lectures in the courses of other faculty. When our UGA colleagues came into class as occasional guest lectures, an unintended pleasant surprise was the way that students perceived the faculty member during the time s/he was a guest. We introduced them as if at a conference, and the accolades were received by the students with a sense of pride about their faculty members. It allowed a different nuance in understanding the skill set of the faculty member than when a faculty member introduces themselves on the first day of class. The “guest lecturer” was viewed as more of an expert and could reinforce the credibility of content and process. It also gave students insight into the multi-faceted dynamics that occur outside the classroom for faculty.

Cross-linking a few assignments. As faculty gain knowledge and confidence in working together as a faculty team, there are often more ways to link information across the course within a professional mindset. A direct way to illustrate that content from one course applies to another course is linking assignments. One assignment can “live” primarily in one course, but have certain “points” (as in part of the grade) applied to another course. Examples of this technique in action include the Human Resource Management students creating the performance review documents for community program implementations and providing feedback and supervision of students in the programming course. The documents are reviewed and improved at the beginning of the semester, and then HR students provide two hours of “community connection” time to come on-site and provide feedback to the students implementing the community program. Another example is when the programming students generate program evaluation data that the Research Methods students analyze. This technique makes real the connections and created natural opportunities for students to connect across cohorts and courses.

Blending individual courses. Some curricula combine masters and undergraduate level courses in a way that allow students to pursue the same content area, but at different depths or foci. This concept can be applied to undergraduate content as well. Teaching a youth development course in concert with a camp administration course allows for one group of students to focus on the campers, while other students focus on the staff and administration. An experiential education theory course can combine with an event management course, so that students experience the effects of the theoretical choices first-hand.

Unifying a cohort with a teaching team. To achieve cohesion and opportunities for more in-depth experiences four courses were combined to create a blocked schedule for incoming students. This step allows the curriculum to be delivered in a more intentional way. For example, instead of Introduction to the major being taught in thin layers across a 15-week semester, time slots dedicated so the introduction topics could occur during the first month of the semester and serve as a foundation for

the rest of the content. A by-product of seeing students every day and taking a team approach generates more accountability for students and more progressive content absorbance. In addition, students report that their learning comes alive and that by facing challenges together, they become a family.

Are You Ready to Team Teach? “We Told You So ... Lessons Shared from a Team”

The idea of team teaching is both exciting and daunting. These opposing reactions can be different between people and within one’s self. As “players” are identified to work together as a teaching team, the following topics are important to discuss both in terms of understanding each other and laying a foundation for compromise. The suggestions offered are based on UGA’s teaching team adventures. As referenced in Denise Anderson’s article, “Overarching Goals, Values, and Assumptions,” a good beginning is an open discussion regarding what is “good teaching.” With each of the topics, the goal is to listen for areas of compromise and to gain a better understanding of your teaching team members. The collaborative discussion process typically involves thoughtfully (not territorially) defending ideas, accepting the suggestions of others about how we conceptualize, design and implement strategies for learning and in the process becoming better teachers. An unexpected outcome is that the collaborative method serves as a role model for students to take in professional settings as they learn to work with others as part of a team.

Focusing on group dynamics. The goal of an intentional learning community begins with the functions of the teaching team. The importance of building trust and respect for individuals on the team cannot be stressed enough. Traditional team-building activities (logic puzzles worked as group) and incremental self-revealing ice-breakers (i.e., two truths and a lie) set the stage for more in-depth conversations and struggles that will likely occur during the semester. It is important to acknowledge the power differentials (i.e., graduate student/faculty dynamic, senior graduate student/junior graduate student dynamic, and the inevitable Mom-Dad roles forced on by students) and history with each other or with the curriculum. By naming these dynamics, it is easier to address conflict when it arises. For the people in the higher power end of the dynamic, it is important to recognize that others may feel less free to offer critique and be more reticent to share ideas. Seeking to celebrate new ideas and incorporate those ideas quickly into the shared culture tends to build confidence in the new team members. The innovation can be something process-related like how attendance is recorded, or something content-related like an application exercise that is added to a class period. The important point is to add the idea and name it as a positive new element to the work of the team. In addition, when important decisions need to be made, the phrase “I will check with the team and get back with you” helps situate the power in the center of the team and not with just one person.

Positive team dynamics can be facilitated with weekly team meetings. A typical agenda might include: once around updates, individual student concerns/celebrations, immediate preparation work for the upcoming classes, longer term planning/brainstorming, and “in-service” type sharing (grading papers, feedback for presentations, and other timely topics to help everyone get on the same page). In addition, having work space that is physically nearby facilitates last-minute trouble-

shooting in between meetings. It is also helpful to have shared spaces. A shared physical space is helpful for keeping student work, archived material, course textbooks and resources. A shared electronic document location is essential (i.e., Dropbox, shared-virtual campus drive, electronic course management system such as Blackboard) as well as a file notation system that quickly clues team members to the latest document. These tools will assist with communication among the team members.

Giving up autonomy. One of the “shocks” to team teaching is sharing responsibility, which means giving up some autonomy. There will be differences in style and approach so having an open mind regarding acceptance of differences is important. Talking ahead of time about how to agree to disagree and who has a “veto” power in what circumstances. There is a learning curve in regards to the mental work to keeping the big picture in mind and how your “part” connects to the whole. There is an art to linking your content with others, and a way to set others up for success (or failure) in how one “passes the baton.” There is a grace in bringing an idea to the team and watching it be improved that is parallel to the revision process used in drafts for writing but not often used in teaching. There is an opportunity to trust that others will get things done and a skill to having a back-up prepared in case they do not. There is an expected flexibility and freedom offered by the dynamic of sharing responsibility. Because content is shared when adjustments need to be made to celebrate success or trouble-shoot a challenge, it is not such a steep hill to climb. And in the event of a tragic crisis such as student injury or death, it is a true marvel to be part of a well-formed response team.

Communicating with students. Team teaching magnifies the many moving parts of a semester because communication occurs in different spaces by different people. It is helpful to have agreed-on systems for returning graded work, responding to emails and even simple conversations. A portable plastic box with a hanging file for each student helps to centralize the process of keeping up with and returning graded student work. The “box” is available in the shared work space and each team member can file work in the box and decisions can be made about which days are best to take it to the classroom, but students can access it during office hours. With email correspondence to students, the choice of whether to cc or bcc other teaching team members is an ethical one. In general, we have found it very important to copy each other so that we all have a better idea of the situations and circumstances within the student population. The process of emailing and CCing each other can be very complicated. It is important to understand how people respond to emails, how fast they respond and if they should respond. It is a different frame of mind for operation. Good communication and understanding of the teaching team members is important for this nuance to function correctly over the long term.

We found it vital to agree on some terms for certain situations. We share a specific vocabulary to promote culture: check with the team; person, process, product (to showcase the intentionality); let’s check the syllabus; applications for your future; writing in context/authentic assignments; colleagues (so they begin to see themselves as professionals); emerging professionals (to showcase the growth); “we” as often as possible to be clear about the team approach; and intent versus impact (when

misunderstandings occur). Further information about some of these terms can be found in the articles in this special issue describing the blended courses and the Unified Core Curriculum at UGA. We have worked hard to avoid the words: overwhelmed (if we plant the seed it will grow); busy work (explain the scaffolding instead); and “I don’t know” (instead, we talk out loud about how we can find the answers). We also agreed on some responses to common student phrases such as:

- “I don’t know”...tell what you remember about it so we can build from there;
- “I’m lost”....what would you do if you were on a New York City street corner;
- “Did/Will I miss anything important in class”...yes, of course, but there are ways for you to make up the content;
- “Can I miss class”...you always have a choice, but there are consequences...let’s talk about it.
- “We aren’t English majors”...writing is an important part of your professional future; it is how we share ideas with others and communicate with the public.
- Or for a question that may seem dumb or lazy...please share with me what steps you have taken to try and find the answer so we can trouble-shoot the process.

These steps help put us on a firm foundation so that we can move forward to meet the unknown challenges.

Making personnel changes. The multi-layered roles of faculty, supervisor, supervisee, and student are complicated. As with any assistantship situation, remembering the different “hats” and at what time they are to be worn is important. When team dynamics are pushed due to conflict, open communication and third party mediation is helpful. As a teaching team within the major, following the *Standards for Group Work* that students use is helpful for process and modeling. Knowing the Human Resource policies is always important, but even more so with the team teaching approach. Because the goal has been connecting on a different level, removing a person from the established or emerging learning community can be painful. The emotional element and bonds formed for students and team members needs attention. As issues arise having a conversation about the issue with the person who knows them best opens the door. If needed, having documented conversations and written warnings are part of the *Standards for Group Work*. It is important to remain confidential about the specifics, but important to be transparent when explaining the process and policy utilized. In most cases, removal from the team does not mean removal from the academic program. Because the relationship will continue, just not as teaching team members, it is vital to use caution with these situations.

Being part of a family. Knowing students and teaching team members better creates joy and complications. Members of the learning community often share joys and sorrows more freely. Maintaining boundaries, yet also supporting each other in times of grief and celebrating each other in times of joy are part of the ebb and flow of any community, but may be unexpected in connection with the classroom. In supporting each other through the tragic loss of two students, medical crises of students, as well as, typical developmental growth for college students and the angst that accompanies it, the teaching team has been a comfort and source of collective wisdom. By team teaching, the community was in place to support the challenges.

Wishes as You Move Forward

This continuum of collaboration and subsequent cautions are offered in the hope that you will find your place in terms of current style of teaching and work as a faculty unit and dream about what benefits and challenges might result from a different approach to supporting student learning. While there will be bumps along the journey, unexpected joys and trials, the overwhelming conclusion is that the improved results are worth the effort. There is constant challenge and change with these models, both with teaching peers and with the current students. It would be impossible to pull out “dusty notes” in this environment. Each day is fresh, allowing for the refinement of knowledge and skill by all. Jump in!

Reference

Boice, R. (2000). *Advice for new faculty members: Nihil nimus*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.