Team teaching: student reflections of its strengths and weaknesses

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Abstract
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Keywords
Team, Teaching, Student, reflections, its, strengths, weaknesses

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Team teaching: Student reflections on its strengths and weaknesses

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This paper examines student experiences and perceptions of two models of team teaching employed at a regional Australian university to teach a large undergraduate marketing subject. The two team teaching models adopted for use in this subject can be characterised by the large number of team members (ten and six) and the relatively low level of team involvement in the planning and administration of the team teaching process. Data for this study was collected from two identical surveys administered in the teaching sessions of spring 2003 and autumn 2004. In total, data was collected from 440 student responses. Despite the relatively weak forms of team teaching adopted to teach this subject, the majority of students like the concept of team teaching. Student experiences of these models provide support for many of the themes found in the extent literature on team teaching including the issue of variation in the teaching styles of different team members. However, this study argues that from the student perspective, the most critical factor in determining the success or failure of a team teaching effort is the actual composition of the team. A team teaching effort is not necessarily greater than the sum of its parts. A team that comprises of 'good teachers', that is those skilful in teaching large classes is far more important than a team comprising 'experts' in different knowledge areas. This aspect of team teaching is often overlooked in the literature.

Introduction

As in many Western countries, academics at Australian universities are expected to do more with less. Australian universities face the challenges and consequences of shrinking financial budgets, falling staff numbers and diminishing teaching resources. Despite these negative pressures, faculty members are expected to maintain the highest level of scholarship and teaching. For many individuals and faculties, one way to address this dilemma is the adoption of alternate methods of teaching that goes beyond the traditional model of one teacher, one class. A teaching method that is frequently cited as a means to address the problem of doing more with less is what is interchangeably labelled as 'collaborative' or 'team' teaching (Booth, Dixon-Brown & Kohut, 2003; Mason, 1992).

It may be possible to consider team teaching as a means to resolve the problem of how to do more with less. However, this alone should not be the justification for its adoption by a group of academics or faculty. Team teaching should not be seen as merely a management tool capable of relieving the pressures on an academics' time. To be adopted and embraced, a teaching method should have as its primary goal the enhancement of student learning and be consistent with the notion of 'good teaching'. Ramsden (1992) suggests "good teaching" involves a combination of a number of elements. These elements include: the recognition that content is more important than method, the degree of engagement students have in the process of learning and the level of responsiveness shown by a teacher to a student's needs (p.176). In other words, neither team teaching nor any other teaching method should be regarded as an outcome in its own right. Rather, the choice of one teaching method over another should be based on the degree to which it engages students in the learning process and responds or fits with their learning needs. If student engagement and needs are central to the notion of good teaching, then it makes sense that student perceptions should be a key element in any reflective practice (Schon, 1987) as well as a faculty's decision to adopt one teaching method over another. In essence, student experiences and perceptions are an important factor in assessing the value of a teaching method and any decision to adopt or continue with a
particular teaching method.

This paper examines students' experiences and perceptions of two particular models of team teaching adopted for use in a large undergraduate marketing subject in a regional Australian university. It does this in an effort to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the team teaching approach from the students' perspective. This paper concludes by making recommendations for the future practice of team teaching.

What is team teaching?

There is no single definition or 'best' model of team teaching. Bess (2000) defines team teaching 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. Other authors suggest that team teaching is a model that involves two or more instructors collaborating in the planning and delivery of a course (Davis, 1995; Zhang & Keim, 1993). Davis (1995) contributes further by proposing that team teaching involves a continuum of models and practices distinguishable from one another primarily on the basis of the level of collaboration within the teaching team. McDaniel & Colarulli (1997) expand upon this notion of a team teaching continuum by suggesting that models of team teaching can be described along four dimensions, namely, the degree of interaction between team members and students during the teaching process, the degree of student engagement in the learning process, the degree of interdependence in the teaching and learning process and lastly, the degree of integration in the content and the perspectives of the discipline based knowledge.

An outcome of the notion that team teaching comprises a continuum of practices is that particular team teaching models can be described as weak or strong depending on the degree of collaboration and integration between team members and the level of their engagement in the teaching and learning process. 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. An example of team teaching at this end of the continuum would be one where the teaching of a subject is divided between faculty members who may each present only one or two lectures over the duration of the course with one member of faculty acting as the overall subject coordinator. Jacob, Honey & Jordan (2002) argue that this form of team teaching is really not team teaching at all. Rather, it is more akin to guest lecturing or at best a form of sequential teaching, where the emphasis is on the presentation of discrete units of study with little emphasis on the unification or integration of these units. At the other, strong end of the team teaching continuum, are those models where team members are both intimately and equally involved in all aspects of the planning, management and delivery of a subject. At this end of the spectrum, collaboration between team members is at its greatest and often at its most problematic (George & Davis-Wiley, 2000).

Why team teach?

Despite the potential for problems to arise through a lack of collaboration and cohesiveness within a team, there are potential pedagogical advantages for those willing to adopt this form of teaching. Beyond the advantage of creating additional time for other academic activities, team teaching can foster a teacher's professional development (McKee & Day, 1992); overcome isolation that is inherent in more traditional forms of teaching (Goetz, 2000) and can aid in improving morale within a faculty and deepen friendships between faculty members (Buckley, 2000). For students, team teaching can help them benefit through the opportunity to receive instruction from experts in specific areas of a discipline's knowledge base and exposure to alternate perspectives on issues (Buckley, 2000). In addition, team teaching provides opportunity for students to witness the functionality of a collaborative team. This is very relevant for students in a business degree who are likely to be part of collaborative teams in their work environments (Mason, 1992). Further, students are exposed to a variety of teaching styles and approaches, which increase the potential for the team to meet the various learning styles of students (Brandenburg, 1997). However, these very advantages may, for some students, be disadvantages. Some students may experience feelings of frustration and confusion when exposed to a variety of different teaching styles and viewpoints within the one subject (Goetz, 2000). This paper now describes two, though not very different models of
team teaching that have been used to teach a large first year marketing undergraduate class in a regional Australian university.

The team teaching of Marketing Principles at the University of Wollongong

Since its inception in the mid 1990s the subject Marketing Principles at the University of Wollongong (UoW) was taught using a traditional model in which one lecturer was totally responsible for all aspects of the planning, management and delivery of the subject. However, with pressure mounting on academics' time and the burden of one person being responsible for a subject that averaged 520 students per session for the past five years, the Marketing Discipline decided to team teach from the spring teaching session in 2003. In spring 2003, the model used was one that involved, one faculty member acting as coordinator and all other faculty members delivering at least one lecture. This resulted in a team of 10 members. In this model, the subject coordinator delivered three lectures including the first and last lecture in the teaching session. Each member of the team was also required to submit to the coordinator assessment tasks, in particular examinable questions suitable for their particular lecture. Beyond this, these faculty members had no further involvement in the subject. The team teaching model was altered in the subsequent session (autumn 2004). The most noticeable being a reduction in the team size from 10 to 6. The principal reason behind this change was some faculty members simply did not want to be involved in what they perceived as merely an exercise in "entertainment". In addition, to provide an 'anchor' for students, one member of the staff took on the role of subject coordinator and provided half of the lectures.

Both the models of team teaching adopted at UoW by the Marketing Discipline are arguably one of the weakest forms of team teaching. Faculty were not intricately involved in all the planning and decision making aspects of the subject, and at times collaboration and collegiality was low. This latter point being evident in such matters as issues of conflict that have arisen within the team and the lateness of team members in responding to various requests from the subject coordinator for assessment tasks and other teaching related material.

These approaches to team teaching have achieved the objective of creating time for academics but beyond that, what has been the impact of these models that consist of a large number of team members teaching a very large undergraduate class? Importantly, what are the student perceptions of these two models of team teaching?

Methodology

To answer the question in the preceding paragraph, students from the spring 2003 and autumn 2004 teaching sessions completed two surveys involving the same questionnaire. This questionnaire examined various aspects of the subject ranging from their tutorial experiences to their overall experience of the team teaching model adopted in their subject. The questionnaire included open ended questions and five point Likert scale questions designed to assess their perceptions of the impact of team teaching on their interest in the subject and their overall satisfaction with the subject. Only the findings from those aspects of these survey forms that inform this study are presented in this paper. In total, 440 survey forms were obtained and analysed.

Data analysis

For the purpose of this paper, we have employed the concept of 'conceptual ordering' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) which refers to the organisation of data into discrete categories or themes according to their properties and dimensions, and then using description to elucidate those themes. Data from the open ended questions on the survey forms was coded and analysed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This method involves the inductive coding of data with the simultaneous comparison of all comments, events and/or forms of incident identified from within the data for similarities, differences and general patterns. In its most elementary form, inductive coding requires fracturing the data into coded units, then progressively and systematically grouping data units that
show similarities and relationships. Using this method of data analysis various themes were found to be common throughout the student responses.

**Students' perceptions of the team teaching models in Marketing Principles**

**Students 'like' the team teaching concept**

Regardless of the team teaching model used in both survey sessions, students are in favour of team teaching over the traditional one teacher one subject approach previously adopted in this subject. When asked on a five point Likert scale (most strongly disagree to most strongly agree), the statement: 'I prefer team teaching style than having only one lecturer for an introductory subject', 63% of respondents in spring session 2003 and 73% of respondents in autumn 2004 either agreed or strongly agreed. Further support for the argument that respondents prefer team teaching to other more traditional forms of teaching are evidenced in their response to the question; 'I think the marketing department should team teach Marketing Principles next session'. On a five point Likert scale, 65% of respondents in spring session 2003 and 77% of respondents in autumn 2004 either agreed or strongly agreed. The reasons for why students prefer the team teaching concept to other teaching approaches are found in their responses to the open ended questions. These questions focussed on exploring what they liked and did not like about the teaching models adopted in this subject.

**The variation in teaching style generates student interest**

Variation in teaching styles and/or the method of presentation by different lecturers motivates students to attend lectures and increases their interest in the subject. Student comments also suggest variation in teaching styles improve the learning environment. The following responses illustrate this theme:

> It is enjoyable to see a different lecturer each week - it is motivating. Further, you don't know what to expect and it is like a surprise. [Further], team teaching enhances appeal of lecturers. Team teaching lecturers seem to be more enthusiastic than lecturers who teach 13 weeks straight. Team teaching prevents "lecturer burnout".

> Team teaching is good for a student who finds a particular style of teaching unsuitable. [The student] will not have to persist with this style through the whole semester. I think it [team teaching] stops Marketing Principles from becoming stagnant and boring. Some of them are interactive and optimistic about what they are teaching.

The relationship between different teaching styles that result from a team teaching situation and student learning styles is well documented in the extant literature. As Jacob, Honey & Jordan (2002) point out, the greater the number of members teaching as part of a team, the higher the probability that a student will encounter a teacher who matches their style (p.3). Brookfield (1990) argues that student preference for variation in teaching styles may be beneficial because their range of learning styles would broaden and they will be more likely to do well in different situations. The above results are also consistent with findings in the literature that exposure to more than one opinion allows students to gain a mature level of understanding knowledge in addition to encouraging students to consider the validity of numerous views (Goetz, 2000).

**There can be too much variation in teaching styles**

Although respondents were overwhelmingly in favour of exposure to a variety of teaching styles, some students felt there were too many variations in teaching style and this was detrimental to the learning environment. This comment was not unexpected considering the size of the two teaching teams. Although students in both sessions commented on the issue of too many variations in teaching style, it was particularly an issue with students from the spring 2003 session. That is, the session in which the larger team (10 members) was employed. The following is representative of student responses concerning the
issue of too much variation in teaching style:

The team teaching approach is, to a certain extent, unfavourable as it provides the students to different teaching techniques. I liked the lecturers who made it more enjoyable or exciting - examples of advertisements; video clips; I did not like the lecturers that were just a lecturer talking for 2 hours... lacked teaching ability or comprehensive knowledge. I think it is better to stick to 3 lecturers over the session.

Students can recognise the advantages that arise through lectures from 'experts'

Students surveyed recognised the potential advantages to be gained from having 'experts' in their respective fields provide lectures. Interestingly, students perceive that because of their specialised knowledge, lecturers are more inclined to be passionate and enthusiastic about teaching a particular topic. The following comments are a selection of student responses on this issue:

I like the idea that they give examples from their own field of expertise and from their personal and work experience, which is fascinating. If there were only one lecturer, I am not sure if he/she would bring so much varied knowledge.

The team teaching approach is helpful as those lecturers who know the most on a topic have the opportunity to deliver it.

These comments support the notion in the extant literature that team teaching exposes students to more than one opinion or perspective of the subject matter and can promote critical thinking skills in students (Buckley, 2000, p.15).

The need to link concepts

Both team teaching models employed in this subject are at the weaker end of the team teaching spectrum. Subsequently, students identified that the linking of the individual lectures into a cohesive body of knowledge was poor. That is, there was not the necessary integration when one lecturer took over from another and this affected students' ability to connect one topic to another. The following student comments reflect this:

There seems to be no direction with lectures. I would prefer to learn a subject from start to finish - from one point to the next...I find the team teaching system to be like chopping and changing unsystematically. It's great to have a variety of well-experienced teachers to learn from, but in a way confuses me.

I don't like the fact that each week lecturers don't always link their lecture to the previous week's lecture. The lack of continuity in teaching styles and not knowing what to expect at each lecture is what I like least about the subject.

For students, the lack of cohesion in instruction is a significant issue. As Angelo (1993) states, "to be remembered, new information must be meaningfully connected to prior knowledge" (p.4). In the weak forms of team teaching adopted in this subject, there is little opportunity to facilitate those all important connections.

The need for teamwork

Student comments suggest the weaker model of team teaching adopted in this subject and the associated lack of cooperation and involvement by all team members in the planning and administration aspects of the subject detracts from the students' learning experience. As the following student statements suggest:

Basically, there doesn't appear to be much consistency in the team teaching approach. All the
teachers should probably discuss it much prior to the course.

Looks like some teaching staff got sucked in to the team rather than truly functioning as part of a team!

The above comments reiterate the importance of 'collaboration' within a teaching team. This issue has implications for both the teaching team and students. For the teachers involved in this weak form of team teaching, the incentives for investment in good instructional development are minimal (Jacob, Honey & Jordan, 2002). This is because an individual teacher's overall time commitment to the whole unit is fairly minor and they are less inclined to feel individually responsible for the unit's success or failure.

**Good and bad lecturers exist regardless of team teaching**

Overwhelmingly, the majority of comments from students related to individual members of the teaching team. Specifically, these comments related to what students regarded as good and bad lecturers. Students appear to be far more concerned with the individual teachers style rather than team teaching itself. In other words, some teaching styles were much more liked than others and this was the main factor on which students judge the success or otherwise of the team teaching effort. The following statement is representative of student comments in this regard:

> Some lecturers were very boring yet some others were fascinating and exciting. Perhaps a method should be considered as to how to 'spice up' each lecture especially it is a mundane topic of marketing. If you get one bad lecturer, it puts you off attending lectures; likewise, if you get a good lecturer, you wish they taught all the time.

Similarly, the skill of the individual lecturer to pace their lecture and manage the content is reflected in student comments as the following suggests:

> There is a lot of content to take in, write and absorb. Some lecturers fly through the information and pack it into the lecture and say...well, it is all relevant and important, so just make sure you know it all.

**Discussion**

Many of the themes identified from the student responses in this study are to be found in the extant literature on team teaching. To that end, the views of these students support much of the current literature on team teaching. For example, the exposure to a variety of teaching styles has both advantages and disadvantages depending on the individual student (Buckley, 2000, p.13). However, the findings of this study also highlight other aspects of team teaching that do not receive considerable attention in the team teaching literature.

The findings of this study suggest that faculties need to be conscious of the need for the adoption of team teaching models that come predominantly from the stronger end of any team teaching continuum. Students appear capable of recognising the need for all team members to be involved in the planning and execution of the subject as this leads to greater integration between the various topics that constitute a subjects' knowledge base. However, the need for commitment and a contribution to the team teaching process creates a potential dilemma for those that see team teaching as a means through which time can be created for academics to pursue other activities. The adoption of team teaching as a management tool capable of addressing the current pressure on resources, notably the issue of time, is at odds with the need to invest time and effort into generating the necessary collaboration between team members that lead to successful team teaching efforts. Subsequently, this paper calls for caution by faculties that may see team teaching as an end in itself and as a means to an end, namely the generation of time for other academic purposes.

The extant literature stresses the importance of collaboration in the team teaching process. However, the
findings of this study suggest that the success or otherwise of a team teaching model is not only dependent on the degree of involvement and collaboration between team members or even the number of team members. Rather, it is dependent on who is in the team. Students in this study appear to measure the success of the team teaching effort on the basis of the teaching skills of the individuals in it rather than any overall impression of what may be gained from a team teaching approach. That is, if individual members are 'good' teachers, then despite other factors such as the team teaching model coming from the weaker end of any team teaching spectrum, the students will endorse the team teaching approach.

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 conductive to learning. This is not necessarily so (McKeachie, 1994). In this study, students judged the success of the team and the individual on the basis of their ability to teach large undergraduate classes not on whether they were experts in a specific area of the subject. Students recognise the benefits of having experts provide insights into their areas of expertise, but this was secondary to the ability of the lecturer to generate interest in the subject material. Since the subject was taught to a large undergraduate class, lecturers skilful in delivering the appropriate level of material in a manner most conducive to learning were rated most highly by the students. Waugh and Waugh (1999) suggest that lectures are most effective when they do not involve the provision of detailed content as their primary objective and advocate the large class lecture as an avenue of supplying students with an atmosphere conductive to learning.

Further, students valued lecturers that were able to address common instructional issues apparent in teaching any large class. Common instructional issues cited by students in our study confirm findings documented by Australian Universities Teaching Committee (2001), some of which are: knowing students and creating interactive classes; engaging students' interest; knowing at which level to pitch the lecture; finding capable / enthusiastic staff; finding effective presentation methods and varying presentation strategies. Biggs (1999) suggests a number of strategies to address common instructional issues apparent in teaching large classes and these include: stimulating active learning and higher order thinking; maintaining interest and varying teaching strategies; selecting the appropriate pace and content for lectures, and performing versus teaching. Good teachers in this subject not only recognised and addressed these issues, but also followed the advice of Ramsden (1992) and were capable of combining "...a number of elements such as the recognition that content is more important than method, the degree of engagement students have in the process of learning and the level of responsiveness shown to student's needs" (p.176). In addition to those lecturers that were perceived as having the skills of a 'good' teacher, lecturers that provide entertainment were also valued highly by students in this study. The emphasis that students placed on lecturers who were 'entertaining' raises an interesting issue. While the increasing emphasis on students as clients in higher education has resulted in many teachers shifting their focus of their lectures from content to provision of entertainment value (Ward & Jenkins, 1992), being a good performer is not necessarily synonymous with effective teaching (Gibbs, Lucas & Simonite, 1996). Nevertheless, there is support within the higher education industry for the idea that a lecture to a large class is a performance (Australian Universities Teaching Committee, 2001). Team teaching itself though should not be adopted because students find it entertaining.

Conclusion and further research

The findings of this study support much of the extant knowledge on team teaching. However, it also adds to this body of knowledge in a number of ways. Most notably, this study suggests students can recognise the advantages of team teaching but this is not how they judge the success or failure of any team teaching effort. Students are conscious of the need for collaboration within the team, the advantage that comes from having experts delivering content, the advantages and disadvantages that come from exposure to different teaching styles. However, from the perspective of students, the critical success factor appears to be the make up of any team. If individual members are 'good' teachers then despite other factors such as the team teaching model coming from the weaker end of any team teaching spectrum the students will endorse the team teaching approach. Therefore, a practical implication emerging from this study that has not received a great deal of coverage in the literature is that in putting together any teaching team, administrators and others need to look beyond what individuals may contribute in terms of expert...
knowledge and must consider how 'good' a teacher' they may be. Further research in this area may be warranted, specifically, what skills are needed to be a team teaching member?

This research also suggests that they may be an optimum team teaching size. Students responded more favourably to the team teaching efforts when there were fewer team members. Was this because of the individuals in the smaller team or is there a team number? It may be of benefit to consider further research aimed at identifying the factors that determine what an optimum team teaching number may be, if in fact an optimum number exists.

In presenting the findings of this study, we acknowledge their limitations. The results of this study apply to one substantive area. That is, the students who studied Marketing Principles at the UoW in the two sessions surveyed. We also acknowledge the subjective nature of this study and as a caveat to the findings we appreciate the appropriateness of Cialdini's (1984, p.9) statement that "no matter how careful and thorough I tried to be, [what] I observed [was] seen only through my eyes and registered through the filter of my expectations and previous experience". Although bearing this statement in mind and acknowledging the limitations of the study we also draw attention to the consistency of the student responses and the size of the sample (n = 440). We also suggest that the findings of this study have relevance to any faculty contemplating the introduction of team teaching to any large undergraduate class.

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