

Enhancing Team-Teaching in Political Science at UCPH

Emily St.Denny
ed@ifs.ku.dk

This project seeks to answer the question:

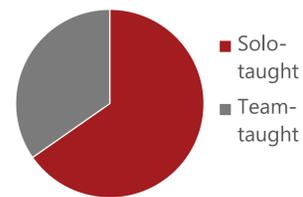
How can team-teaching be supported and enhanced to improve student learning outcomes in the Department of Political Science?

The study is mixed-methods and involving four components rolled out in sequential phases.

- (1) Audit of IFS teaching to identify prevalence of TT (n = 98)
- (2) Survey TT-experienced colleagues about values, challenges, and strategies for success (n = 21/25, response rate 84%, Oct-Nov 23)
- (3) Interviews with TT-experienced colleagues to contextualise survey results
- (4) Development of a TT process tool to be piloted in fall 2024

Findings 1: Status of team-teaching at IFS

- (1) TT is **prevalent**: 1/3 of courses (34/64)
- (2) TT is well **institutionalised**: Most core modules involve a degree of TT



Findings 2: Survey results (continued)

4) Staff operate a range of strategies and tools to coordinate and/or communicate with other instructors during TT. These include: Designating clear lines of responsibility and setting clear expectations (62%); Engaging in joint course planning sessions (62%); Initiating communication about the course organisation and teaching content very early (eg. previous semester).

→ The use of standardized materials (eg. slides, forms, etc...) is less prevalent (19%), as are regular team meetings (23%)

5) There is less consensus about what improvements or resources would make TT more effective and manageable though half of respondents indicate a preference for additional administrative support (50%) and additional incentives or recognition (50%).

Findings 2: Survey results

1) TT is institutionally prevalent and most staff have dual experience of co-ordinating and contributing:

- Most respondents participate in TT occasionally (57%) or very frequently (38%)
- 80% of respondents have experience of a dual co-ordination + teaching role on a TT course
- But few 85% have received specific training in TT

2) There is broad consensus that pluralism is the core value of TT. The top 3 benefits are:

- Better utilisation of expertise among instructors (76%)
- Allowing students to learn a single topic from diverse perspectives (57%); and
- Improved course content (52%).

3) All respondents highlighted the same types of challenge:

- 65% of co-ordinators find managing variability in teaching styles or methods challenging, while 60% of instructors have found it difficult to understand how to deliver their sessions in a manner that ensures curriculum coherence.
- More instructors (75%) than co-ordinators (50%) have found it challenging to manage student expectations or confusion (C: 50%; I: 75%)
- More co-ordinators than instructors have experienced logistical challenges such as scheduling conflicts (50% vs 25%).
- A third of instructors have found it challenging to translate their expertise in the context of a course they did not deliver themselves.
- A clear majority of respondents find TT to require additional time and effort to organize either overall (71%) or with specific regard to co-ordination (14%)

4 clear themes emerged:

1) Set clear expectations and goals: Team members need clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, as well as the overall goals (ie. Intended learning outcomes) of the course.

2) Communicate effectively: Early communication is key for planning phases; regular communication is key for coordination and conflict resolution; parsimonious communication (ie. Only communicating when there is a clear objective) reduces disengagement and confusion.

3) Be flexible and adaptable: Establish and foster a team environment in which members' diverse needs and styles are valued and respected. Use the ILOs as the organising principle for productive managing this diversity.

4) Seek support and feedback: Establish formal processes for collecting ongoing evaluative information, and encourage a culture of informal processes for peer support and feedback.

What is team-teaching (TT)?

TT, also known as collaborative teaching or co-teaching, is a pedagogical approach in which two or more teachers work together to (in whole or in part) plan, delivery and assess instruction for a group of students.

TT can be implemented in various ways. For example team members may share all the responsibilities or they may divide them; they may teach simultaneously or separately.

Team membership can also take different forms. For example a team can comprise individuals from the same subdiscipline, from the same discipline but different subdisciplines, from different disciplines, or even from different sectors (eg. Professional practice).

What are the pedagogical implications of TT?

Pedagogically, TT is primarily valued for ensuring student exposure to a variety of either/both subject-matter perspectives and/or approaches to learning. This can facilitate a greater appreciation of the diversity of thought and perspectives that exist within the academic and teaching community (Little & Hoel, 2011).

TT can also be beneficial to teachers themselves, by allowing them to share teaching-related resources, ideas and insights, as well as increasing the opportunities for peer observation and feedback.

Benefits of TT can include: increased student engagement (Buckley, 2000); improved learning outcomes (Plank, 2011); enhanced teacher development (Roberts et al, 2021); and improved student-teacher relationships (Prizeman, 2015).

What does the scholarship on team-teaching say are the most common challenges for successful TT?

Time and coordination. To work well, TT may require significant time and effort to organise and run (Buckley, 2000). Institutional pressures (eg. Workloads, professional norms) may incentivise massified TT to generate economies of scale, or disincentivising TT as labour-intensive (Minett-Smith & Davis, 2019).

Conflicts and disagreements among members of the teaching team. However, homogeneity, in terms of values, perspectives, and approaches to teaching, are not necessary to creating successful teaching teams (Dang et al, 2022). Strategies that manage rather than suppress individual differences have been associated with better learning outcomes for students (Bennett & Kane, 2014) and professional development for educators (Lester & Evans, 2009) and certain cases.

Curriculum alignment. Work is required to ensure that students are receiving a coherent and consistent learning experience (Buckley, 2000).

Grading and assessment. Teachers need to develop fair and consistent grading practices (Minett-Smith & Davis, 2019).

Learning evaluations. Teachers need to develop ways to simultaneously evaluate (and, if appropriate, course-correct) the effectiveness of both individual and team-teaching (Auman et al, 2007).

Presenting the TT Process Tool

Drawing on these findings, a four-pillared TT co-ordination and improvement tool has been developed, which will be piloted in the Gender and Politics course in Fall 2024.

Pillar 1: Course (re)onboarding

- Every new team member undergoes comprehensive onboarding via one-on-one meeting with coordinator.
- The initial phase covers course presentation, ILOs, logistical details (e.g., communication modes, Absalon usage), and assignment of clear responsibilities.
- Second phase focuses on aligning individual sessions with the overall course, with an emphasis on managing diversity rather than promoting uniformity.
- Existing team members are re-onboarded through a video recap that reinforces key information and highlights any continuities or changes from previous course iterations.

Pillar 2: Optimized communication

- Introduce an annual 'year wheel' that clearly marks dates for key administrative tasks.
- Supplement this with parsimonious communication, emphasizing reminders for upcoming deadlines or important announcements.
- Establish a dedicated shared space for key documents to streamline information access, reducing reliance on extensive email exchanges.
- Encourage team members to initiate communication whenever needed.

Pillar 3: Implementing support and feedback mechanisms

- Formalize processes for ongoing evaluation of team-taught courses and cultivate an informal culture of peer support and feedback.
- Newly onboarded team members are formally invited to audit a session by a more experienced colleague, ensuring exposure to different teaching styles.
- Regularly invite longer-standing team members to participate in observation sessions, fostering a reciprocal learning environment.
- Annually, involve external colleagues in observing sessions and auditing the syllabus, providing an outsider's perspective on the course and its alignment with the broader program.

Pillar 4: Effective use of student evaluations as feedback

- Adapt currently underutilized course evaluations to explicitly address two dimensions of team teaching: (1) overall course coherence and (2) specific contributions and effects of each teacher's input on the overall course.
- Create feedback loop for continuous improvement, by (1) sharing commented analysis of evaluations with the team, and (2) highlighting improvements in the subsequent year's (re)onboarding material.

Methodological and practical reflections:

The survey represents about 35% of the teaching staff at IFS and the interviews represent an even smaller segment of the population. As a result, findings from the research should not automatically be taken as representative. Future research should aim to survey the entire faculty and consider including analysis of how different sub-disciplinary groups organise their TT with a view to identifying pockets of best practice from which to learn.

Finally, efforts to improve TT should also remain critically cognisant of the conditions in which TT is increasingly implemented, including the pressure associated with the massification of HE and rising teaching workloads. Innovation and improvements in this area should remain indexed on achieving benefits for students and teachers, rather than merely leveraging economies of scale (Minett-Smith and Davis, 2020).

REFERENCES

- Auman, A., & Lillie, J. (2007). An Evaluation of Team-teaching Models in a Media Convergence Curriculum. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 62(4), 360-375.
- Bennett, R., & Kane, S. (2014). Factors affecting university teaching team effectiveness in detached working environments. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 38(3), 400-426.
- Buckley, F. J., (2000). *Team teaching: What, why, and how?* Sage.
- Dang et al. (2022). How academics manage individual differences to team teach in higher education: A sociocultural activity theory perspective. *Higher Education*. 84: 415-434.
- Minett-Smith, C. & C.L. Davis (2020) Widening the discourse on team-teaching in higher education, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 25(5): 579-594.
- Roberts, M., C. Bissett & C. Wilding (2023) Team teaching as a strategy for enhancing teaching about theory-into-practice, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 60(1): 26-36.
- Little, A., & A. Hoel, (2011), 'Interdisciplinary team teaching: An effective method to transform student attitudes', *Journal of Effective Teaching*, 11(1): 36-44.
- Lester, J. N., & Evans, K. R. (2009). Instructors' experiences of collaboratively teaching: Building something bigger. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 20(3), 373-382.
- Prizeman, R., (2015), 'Perspectives on the co-teaching experience: Examining the view of teaching staff and students', *REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland*, 29(1): 43-52.
- Plank, K. M., (ed.), (2011), *Team teaching: Across the disciplines, across the academy*. Routledge.