

September, 2006 - Dr. Jennifer Ayala, Education, Dr. Rachel Wifall, English

Teaming up: A Dialogue on the Dynamics of Team Teaching

Take about ten minutes to write an “I am” poem. It doesn’t have to be a polished work, just write your thoughts. We will do the same:

I am...

I am...

This is how we began our course “Literature and Psychology” to explore the theme of identity in literary works and psychological theory. Rachel represents the literature and Jennifer represents the psychology aspects of the course, though in our teaching of the material, we take turns blurring and accentuating these boundaries. We developed and taught this course jointly over the past two summers for the Summer Scholars program—a six week college credit course offered to “outstanding high school students entering their junior and senior years.” It is a special opportunity, one infrequently offered as part of our typical teaching load, and one that we value for many reasons. One particularly rewarding aspect is the opportunity to engage in cross-disciplinary, collaborative teaching. There is an extant literature in education on team-teaching that we will not get into here. Rather than writing a specific teaching tip or outline of strategies, what we will offer here is more of a dialogue, a conversational sharing of our experiences that reflects our practice. We invite you to listen in on our conversation:

J.A. Rachel, what aspect of collaborative teaching do you want to talk about? Maybe we could discuss the preparation portion—thinking about what themes and materials can work together, what actually happens in the classroom, how we assess student performance? Along the way, we can talk about some of the challenges and rewards, some of the structural issues, and some things we figured out how to do better along the way?

R.W. Maybe we can start by discussing how we chose and organized the material, which was a little different each year—plus how we might do it next time. We’ve learned by trial and error (although I have to say that things went pretty well from the beginning; they fell into place rather naturally). After this summer I feel that some things worked better this time around, but for next year there are a couple of things which I’d bring back from last year. It is also stimulating for me to be on the lookout for new options; I’m forced to look at literature differently in order to apply it to the course. I recently read the novel *The Kite Runner* and couldn’t help but think that it would fit so well into our social psychology segment that it should be incorporated into our syllabus in the future.

J.A. Yes, the preparation part is important to discuss, especially because there is this assumption that co-teaching, having two professors in the classroom, means half the work for each professor. In some places, certainly not our experience with Summer Scholars, this assumption gets reflected in faculty pay. However, team teaching can actually be more work because of the preparation involved. When we first started working together, I had this image

of what the class could be like. I had in mind particular psychological theories and activities I wanted to do and relied on Rachel to tell me what literary pieces might work with these theories. This had to be reworked as Rachel suggested we examine the psychology of some interesting literary pieces. At the same time, we tried to keep in mind social justice oriented themes in both fields. We had this back and forth that was not just one brainstorming session, but, particularly the first time we taught it, a few months of “thinking on it” and considering different combinations and possibilities. So, this can be more work, although it is for me more enjoyable because we can offer each other different perspectives on works or theories we know (or learn for the first time).

R.W. In some ways there is indeed extra work for each instructor: for one, we have to read and learn each other's materials and think of ways in which to apply them to our own. When Jennifer first asked me to co-teach this course, I simply tried to think of literary works which lend themselves to psychological analysis. As it turned out, each work I came up with fit well into a different subset (or subsets) of psychology. I already had examined stories of Edgar Allan Poe in terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, so I began there. Knowing that Jennifer's special area of expertise is social psychology, I tried to think of works which address these concerns—specifically those of social identity theory and the idea of “moral exclusion.” This was not difficult, for history is full of tales of prejudice and injustice and these are often the stuff of great, enlightening literature. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and *Miss Julie*--August Strindberg's play of gender and class warfare--are among the literary works we discussed in this light.

I believe it was I who originally suggested we teach a unit on “abnormal psychology,” because I could think of so many literary works either about, or told from the perspective of, characters with mental illness, disabilities, or special abilities. This turned out to be very popular with the students, as Jennifer combined a clinical approach with popular films which illustrate various mental disorders. Students loved Mark Haddon's recent novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, narrated by an autistic boy—and the fact that we joined our reading with a viewing of the film *Rain Man*. Last year we also read William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and students diagnosed all of the novel's characters (almost all of whom exhibit some type of mental and/or emotional dysfunction). What I find here particularly rewarding, from the literary perspective, is that when we read works told from the perspective of either a mentally challenged or an “unreliable” narrator, we must learn to see things from a unique, possibly different perspective, to empathize, and possibly not believe all we are told. These are valuable lessons for high school students and undergraduates who are honing their interpersonal and analytical skills.

J.A. Absolutely. Plus, I think students learn from the interaction between us as facilitators of the class and partners in learning. With team teaching, we model for students the type of collaboration we expect them to engage in when we require group work. It can be tempting to just do turn-taking—I do half the class

and Rachel does half the class and one of us can basically go for a cup of coffee while the other is “on.” Truthfully, it is good to know that if, for example, one of us can’t find a dry erase marker in the classroom, the other can help search for one, allowing for the class to continue without as much interruption. However, I know I lose out if we used only that approach, and to some extent, so can the students. I really appreciate when we as a class are discussing a particular theory or engaging in some kind of activity, and Rachel participates in the discussion by asking me questions, or offering some examples from her life that can illustrate a particular point. We also participate in some of the activities we ask the students to do, which I think sends the message to students that we are all active participants, learners and knowledge constructors. It helps with building rapport with students and perhaps gives them the space to take some creative risks and feel a sense of ownership of their learning. Last year, as part of their presentation requirement (all Summer Scholar classes had to break up into groups and do a presentation in front of the entire program) one group took the creative risk of asking/informing Rachel that she was part of their skit, playing the role of Miss Julie. I thought that was amusing -- especially because it wasn’t me up there—but I was proud of the students for taking this creative risk. It was a really good presentation too. The fact that the students felt comfortable including Rachel in their work this way also demonstrated to me that the students saw us as partners in learning. I’d like to note that this, building relationships, establishing a particular learning climate, takes some time. Although time always seemed to run out too quickly, it helped that we taught in three-hour blocks of time. We were able to meaningfully cover material together with this extended block of time that may have proven more difficult in fifty-minute blocks.

R.W. That's a very good point. I think that the students felt comfortable participating in class and presenting before the entire program, largely because of your idea to engage them personally from the beginning: last year we began the course with the "I am" poems and the question of how we build individual identity; this year we asked them on the first day to write about the experience which they feel has shaped them the most, and focused the class around the question of what makes people act the way they do. The fact that Jennifer and I are not shy to participate on a personal level is important, for it helps to create an open atmosphere for student expression.

J.A. Well that’s my hope because this type of open expression can be a launching point for analysis as we all try to relate personally to the material, but within a particular framework so that it’s not just chatting. At the same time, not everyone feels comfortable with sharing their experiences. This year on the first day of class almost everyone participated meaningfully; I remember feeling surprised and heartened at the depth of sharing and trust the students demonstrated so early on. Don’t get me wrong; it wasn’t all love. One student said something like “there’s nothing important that happened in my life” and could not go beyond that. Sometimes I feel like we could have done more for the students who did not feel comfortable speaking in whole class discussions. I think the writing and small group work helped to engage those students, but still I wonder.

Finding/establishing the boundaries between personal experience and scientific/literary analysis can be challenging, and some can interpret an approach of open expression as meaning that we are “easy.” That is until they see the reading and writing assignments. It’s important to have this balance of rigor and rapport, not mutually exclusive categories, but sometimes they get treated as such. I think they help each other actually. If you are in a safe space where you feel your lived experiences are respected and you think your professors want to see you succeed, you may be inclined to work harder to meet the high standards and expectations. Maybe. It’s not easy to achieve this balance and it doesn’t always work out the way you hope. I think that having another professor in the room with you, engaging in all aspects of the course, is helpful in determining the extent to which this balance is being achieved. If I feel like I may be too easy or hard about something, I can count on Rachel to keep me in check and vice versa. This is especially the case with grading.

R.W. I like to stress to students that discussing one's own experiences in response to class reading is fitting, because why else are we studying anything but to examine the human condition and questions which are pressing to the human psyche and collective experience? As long as analysis is not watered down in the process, students will remember material better if they have established a personal connection to the theories and ideas under consideration. It is interesting, furthermore, that we have always been able to relate all the colloquia and the other student presentations in the Summer Scholars program--from the classes *Civilization and Disease*, *Political Poetry and Music*, and *Cytogenetics*--to at least some aspect of our own class material in *Literature and Psychology*; not only do we study both social science and the arts in our interdisciplinary course, but all of these classes are examining important issues relating to the development of humanity, and they all can overlap in meaningful ways.

As far as grading is concerned, it is *such* a comfort to grade in conjunction with another instructor--provided basic expectations and parameters are set up in advance. In this respect, Jennifer and I happen to "be on the same page" from the start, and we tend to communicate well together, so that's a help too. We usually split a pile of papers in half, grade our halves, and switch the next day; therefore I see half of the papers first and the other half after Jennifer has already registered her reactions to them. Much of the pressure of grading is removed when I know that my judgments are going to be reviewed by someone else before they reach the student, or that I am already reacting to someone else's initial reactions. I don't second guess myself as often because I know there is the safety net of another opinion around the corner, so judgment doesn't rest solely upon my shoulders. If I've come to a hasty conclusion or have missed something, it will be caught without my poring over all the papers multiple times (as I might do on my own).

J.A. This is one of the most valuable parts of team teaching for me, because the process of grading can be very lonely. Providing feedback is one thing, but assigning grades is one of my least favorite parts of teaching, particularly since I mostly assign papers. Rachel articulated the reasons why grading collaboratively works so well, especially since we feel similarly about the

process. That is an important piece to this. Not only can we share in the decision making, we also get to talk about a student who made a particularly good insight in class, or if we are really concerned about another student's writing—details that may make other people's eyes glaze over. As we developed rubrics for student papers, it was also helpful for me to see the editing symbols Rachel used to help students with their writing. This is something I will be referring to in my future classes.

I like our grading process, even though it can sometimes mean handing back papers to students later. This probably sounds obvious, but perhaps in the future we can just ask the students to give us two copies of their papers, then after evaluating them independently, we meet to decide their grades. This requires a little more of the students, but may help us get the papers back to the students earlier.

R.W. Requiring a little more of the students is not a bad thing—if I let them, all my students would simply email me their papers and let me deal with the rest. Some instructors may prefer this method of submission, but I seem to always need a hard copy in front of me, especially because I like to make notes in the margins and also add the editing symbols you mentioned, to give students tips on their writing techniques. It may be easier for them to read, after all, if our comments are written separately, not cluttering up the margins of one paper.

This concludes our chat about team teaching. We describe our experience with this practice, acknowledging that we are relatively new to team teaching, and tipping our hats off to our colleagues who have been doing this for years. In our conversation, we highlight the rewards to us personally, and to the students hopefully. We also share some of the lessons we learned (and will continue to learn) about the process along the way. This collaboration worked for us for several reasons, some structural, some personal, as alluded to in our conversation. Considerable time and work is involved in the form of collaborative preparation, debriefing and assessment meetings. These efforts were recognized in terms of faculty compensation; the extended class period also helped. Finally, the similarity of our views and philosophies on working with students helped make the class and decision making process run more smoothly.

Reflecting on this experience, we see how important communication about priorities and approaches is--between co-instructors, as with any type of relationship. We were fortunate that, while we do have different teaching styles, we supported each other's approaches. Although we planned the content and material beforehand, we figured out some of the other stuff along the way, and it worked out for us. In retrospect, it may have been better to have discussed some of the procedural and philosophical issues beforehand. We would recommend perhaps that instructors teaching together for the first time, particularly those who are unfamiliar with each other's styles, really communicate throughout the process, but especially beforehand. Dialoguing about your priorities, philosophies, and approaches in working with students; working out a process by which decisions about course content and balancing in-class "floor time" for each professor; determining how student performance

should be evaluated; setting forth common goals and expectations, all seem to be important communication points. Clearly, we believe there are many benefits to team teaching, and look forward to future opportunities to work together and with others at the college.