Collaborative teaching of a social studies methods course: intimidation and change.

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The collaborative teaching project between school and university educators highlighted ways for improving the education of prospective teachers. Through this project, the gap between teaching theories and practice were diminished. However, there were a lot of barriers to the effective implementation of the project. Foremost of these was the discomfort felt by classroom teachers when working closely with university faculty. Their differing views were sometimes difficult to reconcile. Also, some felt that collaboration would limit their academic freedom and autonomy.

In this article, we describe our initial apprehensions, difficulties of working across our differences, and changes in our understandings and teaching practice as we collaboratively taught a social studies methods course.

We began with stereotypes of each other implied by our university/school and professor/graduate student/classroom teacher roles. After 4 years of working together, we have come to understand our positions, knowledge, and expertise in different ways and as a result have changed our teaching.

We began our co-teaching experience as members of a Professional Development School (PDS) project. In this PDS, university faculty, graduate associates, school principals, and class, room teachers work closely to construct and evaluate the redesign of the university’s elementary teacher education programs. One important aspect of this collaboration is co-teaching the methods courses for the Master of Education certification students in the program. Classroom teachers, doctoral students, and university professors make shared decisions about course syllabi, assignments, and evaluation to bring theory and practice into a productive dialogue.

Despite initial support for co-teaching the methods courses, both university faculty and classroom teachers were reluctant. Classroom teachers were uncertain about working with university faculty, about the time necessary for planning, and especially about leaving their classrooms for half a day each week. University faculty were hesitant to relinquish their autonomy and worried about the time required to team teach.

These hesitancies resulted in less concern about teachers' expertise in the subject area and more on their willingness to participate. Rather than participating in a formal selection process, faculty and teachers were asked to volunteer; decisions about which teachers would teach with which faculty were left to informal negotiations.

This article focuses on the co-teaching of a social studies methods course. We do not include practical descriptions of how we organized the social studies course, the students’ evaluations of the course, or assessment of student learning. This is not to deny the importance of student outcomes that we discuss in other work in progress, but to situate this study within the literature on collaborative work and professional development.

Studies of teachers’ professional development supported our interest in looking at our own learning and development. Traditionally evaluation of change initiatives have considered classroom instruction and student performance more than the teachers who managed the learning environments. Attention to teachers’ growth and development has been slow in coming, particularly studies that include self-study and reflection.

Recently, researchers have been using case studies, collaborative methodologies, narrative forms, and feminist theories to look at the complexities and perspectives of teachers (Miller, 1990; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Action research is enjoying a resurgence, and teachers are increasingly studying and publishing reports on their own teaching and beliefs (Bricher, Hawk, & Tingley, 1993; Nalle, 1993; Paley, 1989). Journals are increasingly including collaborative studies by teachers or between teachers and researchers (Gitlin, 1992; Hunsaker & Johnston, 1992). Greene (1988) argues that stories--and myths, and diaries, and histories--give shape and expression to what would otherwise be untold about ‘our lives’ (p. x). Multiple forms of expression help to reveal the complexities of personal lives as they are reflected in professional lives and development. These studies point to the value of teachers considering their own thinking and teaching as sites for reflection, inquiry, and change.

The authors (Lisa Westhoven, a classroom teacher; JoAnn Hohenbrink, a graduate teaching associate; and Marilyn Johnston, a professor) co-taught a two-quarter course for 2 years (1991-1993). Marilyn and Lisa co-taught the same course the following year, 1993-1994, and again in 1995-1996. JoAnn did her dissertation study on change in the first year of co-teaching (data collected 1991-1992). We extended what we learned in the first year through
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continued conversations and self-reflection during the subsequent 3 years.

The changes we describe did not come easily. We were initially uncomfortable working together. Lisa and JoAnn felt intimidated; Marilyn was unclear how to bring others into her class. We began the course using Marilyn's syllabus and reading materials because co-teaching arrangements were approved by the school district and university just before the quarter began. We had no time before class started to plan the course collaboratively or to talk about our apprehensions and differences.

We spent much time talking and planning throughout our co-teaching experience. Marilyn found planning took much more time than would have been required had she taught alone. Lisa had to plan for her substitute teacher as well as the methods course. We tried to deal directly with feelings of intimidation and imposition, which required building trusting relationships to support handling sensitive issues and criticisms. Our attempts were necessarily partial. We could pursue only those things of which we were aware; we left undisturbed other issues and silences. We are nevertheless convinced that co-teaching has rich potential for prompting self-reflection for both university and school-based participants. It led us to significant changes in our understandings and teaching practices and, most important, brought the limitations of the traditional separate roles of schools and universities in teacher education into stark relief.

Methodology

We used several theoretical positions in our research. First, we used interpretive/hermeneutic theories (Gadamer, 1984; Ricoeur, 1981; van Manen, 1990) to inform our interest in understandings. We were particularly interested in how our individual understandings about teaching and learning, and about schools and universities, influenced our ability to collaborate. We were also curious to trace our construction of individual as well a shared meanings that might emerge from this experience.

Second, we depended on poststructural feminist theorists (Davies & Harre, 1990; Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1986; Lather, 1991; Weedon, 1987) to think about issues of language, positionings, and voice. Like interpretive theorists, poststructural feminists are interested in the discursive and historical construction of meaning. Feminists, in addition, pay attention to the personal and political character of the self and the social context within which issues of power and control are ever present. In particular, we were interested in how our institutional contexts and socialization made interpretations of each others' meanings difficult. Our commitment to separate texts written to represent our different voices and perspectives is also supported, as well as problematized (Lather, 1991, p. 43), in feminist work.

We used audiotaped conversations over a period of 3 years (some 50 conversations), journal writing from 4 years, and the individual and group interviews conducted for the dissertation study as our major data sources. Periodically, we examined the data to look for themes and changes in our understandings. These analyses became the focus of further conversations that in turn were data to be examined at a later point in time. This article is the collaborative result of 5 years of working and writing together.

Three Voices in a Dialogue

We write in three voices in order to capture our individual perspectives. We address the two themes of intimidation and change emerging from our study. The first theme addresses our beginning assumptions about knowledge that led to intimidation and apprehension. In the beginning, we assumed that university knowledge is more important than school knowledge and valued theoretical/research knowledge over practical knowledge. From our present perspective, we would argue that such distinctions are not helpful because they mask both teachers' theories and professors' practical knowledge. The second theme, change in teaching, I describes our evolving understandings and teaching practices.

Whose Knowledge Counts?

We struggled continually with assumptions about the different knowledge bases that we carried into our co-teaching experience. These assumptions, at times, led to feelings of intimidation and fears of imposition. These feelings are reflected in some of our journal entries during the first two quarters we worked together.

Lisa: I am very excited, very nervous, and very apprehensive--I am entering a world I know little about. What am I hoping to be able to offer? Social studies is not an area I would call my strength!! The conversations at Bernies [the deli where we had our morning planning meetings] are quite intimidating. The other three (professor and two doctoral students) sit there and discuss things I've never heard of--`postmodern,' `hermeneutic'--and they throw around authors' names. I could have been listening to a conversation in Japanese. That's when I think--What am I doing here? (10-1-91)

JoAnn: I really am intimidated by Marilyn and how she
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Marilyn: JoAnn did the discussion of one of the assigned readings today and seemed uncomfortable. I’ve wondered whether I should leave when she’s doing her part sometimes just to give her some space. She said she doesn’t feel comfortable sometimes because it’s about social studies and I’m her advisor. Maybe she’s trying to do things in the way I would, but it’s not how she would do it on her own. She runs a discussion in a very open way, asking students to respond to other students’ ideas without focusing the questions. It made me think how much I try to get students to think through an issue (i.e., my issue) in a way that may not be responsive to their interests. I need to think about this. (1-13-92)

JoAnn: My part of class today was the assigned reading. I wanted students to be involved in discussion. Because of the time frame, I couldn’t (or didn’t feel I had time) to do the outline of the article. I was uncomfortable with Marilyn being there. I was in Marilyn’s graduate social studies seminar and we worked on the same reading. I didn’t want to put her on the spot, but I wanted her to talk about how she thought the example in the article was realistic. I remember her doing that in the seminar. I was uncomfortable not telling the students what I thought because I thought Marilyn expected that of me. It’s not what I would do in my own class. Sometimes I just feel soooo wishy/washy. (11-13-91)

Marilyn: At this evening’s planning session we had a difficult time talking about how much this is my class and how much ownership I should have or want. JoAnn clearly brings a level of expertise in social studies, but we have different Perspectives about the goals. Lisa brings classroom expertise, but in ways that don’t get well integrated into what we are doing in class. Maybe it’s because she’s teaching social studies in a different way than is espoused in class. Does this mean imposition of my way or university perspectives over what teachers typically do in their classrooms? Is this what co-teaching is all about? I keep asking myself how much of the course and my perspective I am willing to give away. (11-16-91)

JoAnn: I like what we planned for class. I like the book, ’White Teacher,’ and I think having students reflect on their classroom experience will be good. Again Marilyn is handling the discussion of the reading. But, again, it’s her topic. I’m glad we’re using the video from Marilyn teaching in Lisa’s classroom. (3-2-92)

Lisa: Next I think I need to write about Marilyn’s visit to teach in my room. At first I worried about what her first impressions of my room would be. Once she got there, I worried about what she would think of my kids. What would she think about the way I handle my kids? Her lesson went very well especially for not knowing the kids. It made me feel good because I thought she asked the same kinds of questions I ask them. I think the lesson went similar to the way it would have gone if I had known how to do it. I guess I thought she would have every child sitting on the edge of his/her seat and they would all be wrapped around her finger. (3-6-92)

Marilyn: I’ve puzzled a bit about why it’s the eighth week of the quarter and I’m just getting out to Lisa’s classroom to do some teaching. It’s clear from our discussions that coming to her classroom bothers her. I get set up as the authority and therefore a critical eye. But then, I feel like I’m under scrutiny having co-teachers in my class. I often wonder what they think, what doesn’t make sense, how my biases appear to them. There’s rarely any negotiation that suggests I’m doing it wrong and that it ought to be more like how Lisa is teaching. There are differences between my philosophy and Lisa’s, but it always seems like she’s changing to accommodate my point of view rather than the other way around. Is this imposition from the power of one knowledge base over the other? (3-6-92)

Joint Reflections on “Whose Knowledge Counts?”

Our worries as we started our co-teaching experience were clear. Lisa was apprehensive about entering the university world with its new vocabularies and expectations. Her strength as a teacher was not in social studies; in fact, she did not like social studies much at all. She had signed up to teach language arts, but at the last minute, the professor decided not to take a co-teacher, and Lisa joined us. JoAnn was intimidated by Marilyn because she was her adviser. In addition, they had
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differences of opinion about what should occur in a social studies methods course. She was also apprehensive about looking uninformed if she did things more to her liking. Marilyn was committed to co-teaching in principle but unsure about how to keep some integrity to what she wanted in the course and still share the decision making. Underlying all of this was the assumption that the university knowledge exemplified in Marilyn’s attitudes and purposes had higher value than what a graduate student or teacher might bring to the course.

Throughout the two quarters of co-teaching, we worried about how each of us thought about each other. We talked a lot about issues of power and role and the ways they interfered with making our work together more genuinely collaborative. We made decisions to work in ways that would push against the stereotypic expectations we held for each other and that students held as well. We decided never to let Marilyn begin class so that students would see Lisa and JoAnn as equally in charge of the announcements, assignments, and evaluation issues discussed at the beginning of each class. We tried to share different aspects of the class and defy expectations when we could. Rather than Marilyn leading discussions about the readings, we shared this responsibility. Rather than Lisa doing all the talking about a videotape of her classroom, we discussed it ahead of time and shared in the class discussions. We divided different sections of each class session so that each of us had equal responsibility for setting up activities or beginning discussions. We set time periods for each section so that Marilyn’s tendency to go on and on about something would not infringe on what Lisa and JoAnn had prepared to do in class. These arrangements were symbolically important to us even if the students did not always recognize them.

It was easy, however, to fall back into stereotypic power relations and role definitions. Lisa countered this by pushing hard for her fair share and for a sense of equality. We nicknamed her our watchdog of hierarchy. It was extremely helpful that she was willing to say when she thought that Marilyn and JoAnn were usurping more than their share of time. Marilyn and JoAnn tried also to do their share of asking questions about procedures and responsibilities. We were continually amazed at how easy it was to fall back into familiar patterns and expectations. The hours we spent the first year talking into a tape recorder for JoAnn’s dissertation helped us to continually keep these issues in front of us.

Changes in Understanding Teaching

Change occurred for each of us as a result of this co-teaching experience. We have made changes in our teaching and readjusted our goals for teaching the social studies methods course. Although change occurred for all of us, the character of the change was different. How we changed is related to the problems and demands of our institutional contexts and our backgrounds and personalities. These influences are reflected in our separate accounts of change written after a second year of co-teaching together.

Lisa: I could probably fill a book if I were to describe all the changes that have taken place in my classroom and in myself since becoming a part of the co-teaching team. I have questioned my whole approach to teaching. Because change demands time, thought, planning, and risk taking, I have only begun to make the changes I want. I have gone from being a very traditional teacher who was very teacher centered, and moved to a classroom where children are more involved in their own learning. I now focus less on facts and more on critical thinking, inquiry, and process. I make fewer classroom decisions without first having a conversation with the class in order to have a better understanding of students’ wants and needs. For example, at the beginning of this school year instead of having the room setup when students walked in, we discussed the physical arrangement of our classroom and what makes one way work better than the next. Students were involved in the decision about the room. I was wondering lately what the kids think about our community-building time, so I asked them to write about it:

Jeff: I learned we can work things out as a group and the teacher doesn’t make all the decisions by herself.

Jane: What you can learn is how to solve problems.

Mary: I think it is worthwhile because it helps you think about your problems and we solve class problems together. Working together is better than working alone.

I was pleased to find that this kind of classroom is making a difference in their thinking. Their responses have encouraged me to plan more group cooperative work and less individual isolated work. These changes have not always been easy and I find myself much more unsure about what I’m doing than when I was the teacher and this is what we’re going to do. I’m never sure if I am giving too much input and therefore having too much influence. I’m also not sure exactly when to step in and be ‘the teacher.’ These emerging ideas, like shared classroom ownership and openness to children’s input, make my job less predictable and more ambiguous. In many ways I feel like a first year teacher again; I have more questions than answers.
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JoAnn: When I think about how I have changed based on my co-teaching experience, I reflect especially on my attitudes and beliefs. First, I would say that I thought of teaching as a one-person job and of myself as the one who has the knowledge that students need to learn. This was based on my own experience in elementary school and college. How could it be any different? What I found out is that it could be very different. I experienced a classroom situation that was filled with ideas. I became aware of the socio-cultural nature of learning as I co-taught with others whom I knew and respected. I was continually aware of how much I was learning from our conversations both in class and during planning. In turn, I realized that the students in our class were also learning from one another, and us from them. Was it because there were more 'teachers' with ideas that students felt they could share their ideas as well? We used cooperative learning groups to generate ideas. We encouraged students to speak from their own perspectives, and to value other points of view. Co-teaching was definitely not a hierarchical experience of teaching and learning for me.

Because of my co-teaching, I have taken a much different view of my teaching now that I am a college professor on my own. Instead of having college students focus on me as a teacher, I have students sit in a way that they can see and talk with each other. I try to encourage them to take an active part in class believing now that there are always as many teachers and learners as there are participants in the room.

Through this experience, I came to understand how isolating teaching is and the problems isolation can create. Only by doing the teaching differently was I able to understand better my previous experiences. I also experienced how this isolation kept me from seeing different options. For example, I used to think that each student should be assigned an individual field placement. Now I see the importance of students working in pairs in their fieldwork because of the social learning that takes place as they discuss their experiences together.

Co-teaching challenged me to think about how others see issues and teaching. Seeing other perspectives has helped me to examine my own, and, as a consequence, I have changed my mind about some things and expanded my thinking about others. I have not adopted someone else's perspective, but rather used their ideas to extend my own thinking and teaching practice.

Marilyn: Initially, I thought I could best facilitate collaborative teaching by helping my co-teachers become more like me and my becoming more like them. I thought if I gently shared what I knew with them and spent time in classrooms with them, we could both benefit. I knew the practical examples I used in my courses needed updating, but I wasn't sure that I had anything particularly new to learn. I had been a classroom teacher for 15 years. I always thought my courses were practical because I brought in lots of classroom activities. I thought that Lisa could offer fresh examples because she was in a classroom every day and by being around her and her classroom I could gather some 'fresh' examples as well. I knew I would change in some ways because I'm always looking for new ideas and like a good debate about issues. Nevertheless, deep in my heart, I thought Lisa and JoAnn had more to gain from this experience than I did. Lisa kept asking me how I was changing. She was full of stories about how her classroom was changing and was convinced that a test of genuine collaboration would be that I was also changing. It was clear that the course was different. There were three of us contributing, we expressed our different points of view, and we handled class situations and student questions in different ways. I could see the students were benefiting from this diversity. This was not the kind of change Lisa was looking for. It took a while for me to see the impact co-teaching was having on my own understandings. Rather than thinking we would all become the same, I came to see how much we were learning from our differences. It was from the differences that I was learning about my own ideas. Rather than imparting knowledge that I assumed others needed, their questions were helping me to think better about my own conceptions of social studies. Many times my commitment to a particular point of view came into question as Lisa and JoAnn asked questions. Sometimes the questions came from Lisa's immediate classroom context; sometimes the questions were more abstract. Lisa and JoAnn were more sophisticated with issues than the preservice students in our classes and so their questions pushed harder at the core of my beliefs. I saw much more clearly how complicated some of these ideas are and the ways in which they can be easily misunderstood. For example, I used to rant and rave about the shortcomings of textbooks for social studies instruction. Lisa and JoAnn helped me to see the ways in which I made students feel guilty about using them especially as first year teachers. That was not what I intended. As they helped me to see the consequences of my position, I could work on ways to make my point, but not debilitate new teachers. We now talk about textbooks as 'springboards' rather than 'platforms.' The students have benefited and so have I.

The question of whose knowledge counts gradually disappeared; rather the conversations became three people working together to understand better what we were trying to do together. Whether it was a theoretical or practical issue became a useless distinction. We were
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working to understand each other and our different ideas. Each of us at times had questions that helped us understand something new. We eventually trusted each other enough to take risks, expose our ignorance, and test our ideas before they were well formed. It was exciting rather than intimidating. We worked hard to understand that we each had different helpful things to offer in the conversation.

Joint Reflections on Change

As Lisa and Marilyn begin a third year of co-teaching, things again changed considerably in the course. It seemed less important to work against typical expectations. Marilyn started class if it made sense for her to do so. Lisa discussed a videotape from her classroom because she best knew what had happened. We no longer felt it necessary to put time limits on sections of class designated to a particular person. Rather, we decided who would be responsible for moving from one topic to another and let the flow of the class determine the time spent on a particular issue.

The major change in the course, however, was not as obvious as these changes in course structure. It concerned our growing appreciation for each other’s knowledge and expertise. This moved us beyond an appreciation for differences that developed during the first year. Appreciating another person’s knowledge and expertise came to mean seeing a potential for others to contribute to our own thinking and our shared project. This involved an acknowledgment that we needed another’s ideas and expertise, that there will be times when their ideas will be better than our own, and that they will legitimately claim the right to their fair share of authority and decision making. Intimidation is less likely when both parties respect the other’s knowledge and expertise, especially in the context of a trusting relationship. In such a context, challenge becomes a way to learn rather than a means to intimidation; differences of opinion provide options rather than conflict.

Appreciating each other’s knowledge and expertise took time. We needed to know about each other’s institutional contests and background. We needed to understand each other’s commitments and concerns. We needed to build some shared understandings. What we have come to share is as important and valuable as our differences. For example, Lisa has recently come to understand how the differences in expectations in schools and universities influence how people talk to each other.

Lisa: It took awhile but I have come to recognize that in different contexts (my school and the university) different types of discourses are used. At the university, multiple perspectives, divergent thinking, and the questioning of ideas are encouraged. Schools typically socialize teachers to accept ideas, ask questions only to clarify, and keep quiet when we disagree with the perceived majority. When teachers act at school in the same manner as university-based teachers do at their institutions, they are thought to be negative or ‘trouble makers.’

With different expectations inherent in our separate institutional contexts, it is no wonder that university- and school-based practitioners have difficulty talking to each other. We are used to different ways of dealing with ideas and conflicts. In our co-teaching, we needed to understand these different norms and positionings (Davies & Harre, 1990) and how they influenced our interactions as we worked together.

Change came slowly. We may be slow learners, but I think not. There are many barriers to be overcome, many understandings that must be constructed, and levels of trust that must be nurtured. Expecting immediate changes in minds or institutional structures seems to us to be naive. Collaboration across the significant differences of schools and universities is challenging, and change for us took commitment, empathy, and good will.

Conclusion

In the beginning of our co-teaching experience, we could do little more than articulate our differences. Although we started in contradictory positions, we have influenced each other’s thinking and have found new ways to help students negotiate the differences between what research says and the realities of classrooms. But, of course, we have not resolved all potential conflicts. And the possibility of intimidation from university folks and passive resistance from school participants is as likely as not. Working together does not guarantee better feelings or avoid all intimidation. There are issues of role, beliefs, and personality that must be considered and taken into account. None of this is easy, but when it works, it can be very rewarding.

Most school-based and university-based educators acknowledge, along with the popular press and national commissions reports (Carnegie Forum, 1986; Holmes Group, 1990), that the lack of cooperation between schools and universities is counterproductive. How to work against the stereotypes and hierarchies that interfere with more genuinely collaborative relationships is unclear. How to resolve the differences in purposes and institutional rewards is uncharted territory. How to construct situations where we learn to appreciate our different expertise and
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work toward common goals presents a clear challenge. We found the weekly interactions and joint decision making of a co-teaching situation to be a rich context to discuss and surmount some of these challenges.

References


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