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Best Practice Explored – Team Teaching Approach in One Online Course (A Case Study)

Abstract

In recent years, team-teaching has been considered an important part of course delivery to enhance class interaction, and improve the teaching and learning environment for both facilitators and students. Team-teaching specific to the online environment is somewhat under-examined, but researches on the method suggest that it can be beneficial to students if implemented effectively. This paper reports on the effort at The University of the West Indies Open Campus (UWIOC) in utilizing the team-teaching approach in one online course. The purpose of the case study was to identify the effectiveness of team teaching and determine if such collaboration would be beneficial to students and facilitators. Using the course as a case study, qualitative and quantitative data was collected from facilitators and students to get their perspective on the experience. The main theme from the findings is the timely feedback that students received. The findings revealed that the experience gave facilitators a stronger sense of collegiality, and helped to improve their instructional practices. For the students, the experience was very good as they received more individual attention, timely feedback, and learning was enhanced. The endorsement of the approach by the students was evident by the one hundred percent consensus, that, if offered again, they would enroll in another team-teaching class. The findings will be shared with the Programme Delivery Department team for discussion, as they suggest that team-teaching is an element of best practice that can be explored as a means of improving teaching and learning at The UWIOC.

Keywords: Team-teaching, collaborative approach, co-teaching

The demand for online education is becoming the norm, and is increasingly filling a niche for students who are far away from a regular campus, who want to fit continuing education into their busy lifestyles, or to take advantage of academic resources in other parts of the state, country, or even the world (Scribner-MacLean & Miller, 2011). In seeking to meet the demands, Motteram & Forrester (2005), state that it is important for distance educators to determine the most effective means of introducing students to the online environment, supporting their assimilation to the virtual learning community and sustaining their motivation as online learners. As one of the leading institutions in the Caribbean that offers online education, The University of the West Indies Open Campus (UWIOC) administrators recognize that innovative ways must be found to remain competitive by continuously improving what is being offered. The goal is to identify and adopt best practices in the online environment that can give the students the optimal teaching/ learning experience.

In exploring online teaching practices, team-teaching emerged as an effective strategy to improve practice and instruction, and better meet the diverse needs of students (Scribner-MacLean & Miller, 2011). So what is team-teaching? Team-teaching is referred to by other terms such as co-teaching, co-enrollment and collaborative teaching. Friend & Cook (2012) define co-teaching as a specific service delivery option that is based on collaboration. It is not just a technique that can be applied to divide the labor within a unit; rather it is a creative and thoughtful mechanism for fostering a dynamic student-centered learning environment (Partridge & Hallam, 2005). Brody (1994), Villa, Thousand & Nevin (2013) state that co-teaching involves two or more teachers, planning, teaching and assessing the same students in the interest of creating a learning community.

There is limited research on online collaborative teaching, as most literature on the method speaks to face to face delivery. Although limited, researches revealed potential benefits to students, which prompted the idea of introducing the method in one online course at The UWIOC. With effective execution, it was anticipated that the students would gain the best teaching/learning online experience. Scribner-MacLean & Miller (2011) state that an effective online teaching team can ensure that students' queries are answered in a timely manner, which can serve to reduce frustration for students. In addition, potential technology problems, questions about course materials, and assignments can be dealt with quickly with two instructors managing the course. Working with co-instructors can also allow students more rich feedback from instructors with different experiences and points of view.

A Case for SOWK1001: Introduction to Social Work

Introduction to Social Work (SOWK1001) is a level one course from the Bachelor of Science and Associate Degrees in Social Work programmes. The course comprises eight units, delivered over a 13 week semester and carries summative and formative continuous assessments with no final written examination. The online version of the course was first offered in semester one of academic year 2013/2014. Enrollment was quite large with, five groups and five e-tutors. Prior to the online modality, the course was offered face to face.

In semester one, academic year 2014/2015, the introduction of financial clearance hold placed on students accounts that were not settled, resulted in a reduction in enrolment for some courses, including SOWK1001: Introduction to Social Work. The standard e-tutor/student ratio per course is 25:1 where the Course Coordinator is assigned to manage groups of up to 600 students, with a compliment of 25 e-tutors. In cases where enrolment exceeds 1 group, but not enough to form 2 groups, the course coordinator assumes the dual role of course coordinator and e-tutor. The number of students enrolled in SOWK1001 was more than 25, but not enough to have 2 standard groups that would require 2 e-tutors.

Team-teaching concept in the online environment is somewhat new to The UWIOC, and remains unexplored. To move from idea to implementation, discussions were held with the course coordinator and e-tutor assigned to the course. Both facilitators have never team taught, but were quite receptive to the idea. To implement the team approach, a standard e-tutor/ratio was not applied. Instead of assigning the first group of 25 students to the e-tutor and the remainder to the course coordinator, all students were kept in one group. While the Course Coordinator assumed a dual role, her main responsibility of providing overall academic and pedagogic supervision for the delivery of the course remained unchanged.

Profile of students

The total number of students registered for the course was 44. They were located in 14 different sites across the Caribbean. Of the 44 registrants, 8 did not commence the course.

The ratio of students in the course included 18 females and 1 male. The Age Range was 18 to 55. In terms of programme of study, 53% were pursuing the Bachelor Science Social Work, 42% Associate of Science Social Work, and 5% Diploma Social Work.

University of the West Indies Open Campus and its Practices

The University of the West Indies Open Campus is based on the idea that the high-quality university education, research and services available at the institution should be open and available to all people who wish to reach their full potential in and outside of the Caribbean Region.

The University's Strategic Plan (2012-2017) is the compass that guides the operations of The UWIOC. Outlined in the Plan are some key perspectives and themes that dictate the practices of service delivery. The perspective of Teaching, Learning and Student Development strategic objective is to 'enhance learning effectiveness by providing students with a more diverse, flexible and multidisciplinary teaching/learning experience'. Under the theme of academic quality, the goal is to ensure excellence of academic processes. The Perspective of employee engagement and development strategic objective is to introduce training in leadership and management for all levels of staff as part of talent management and career development planning. These perspectives and theme are not isolated, but complement each component, and ultimately impact delivery practices. The practices identified here are Model of Course Delivery, Staff Engagement and Quality Assurance for Course Delivery.

Model of Course Delivery

A more inclusive model of teaching and learning that draws upon a collaborative approach to students, lends to better outcomes (De Fazio, Gilding & Zorzenon, 2000). In keeping with idea of collaboration, the delivery model used at The UWIOC, features a team approach with instructors that facilitate new and existing online courses, where the curriculum has already been determined. The team of instructors includes Course Coordinators, e-tutors, and Examiners.

Course Coordinators provide overall academic and pedagogic supervision for the delivery of the course, monitor the teaching/learning process including the activity of e-tutors, ensure that students are given appropriate guidelines, and provide necessary support to assist students in their study of the courses. The Course Coordinator is not assigned a group unless thirty or less students are enrolled in the course. In such cases, he/she is assigned the dual role of coordinator and e-tutor.

E-tutors are responsible for guiding the work and facilitating the interactions and discussions with the students' assigned to his or her group. E-tutors guide the learning experience of all students and act as resource for learners as they move through the course.

Examiners' duties include all processes of second marking of scripts, weighting of assignments, sample size for second marking, and methods for ensuring that the assessment process is valid and reliable.

Complementing the teaching staff is a team of support personnel, comprising:

Programme Managers (PMs) - manage all programme matters by having direct responsibility for overseeing the delivery of assigned programmes.

Clerical Assistants (CAs) - support the Programme Manager by assisting with various aspects of administration and programme delivery.

Learning Support Specialists (LSSs) are responsible for course template/shell and providing technical support to course coordinators and e-tutors in the Learning Exchange (LE), as well as technical training in the use of the course delivery platform and instructional delivery tools.

Course Delivery Assistants (CDAs) are responsible for supporting an internal quality control process that monitors the work in the LE to ensure students receive the necessary support as required.

The Instructional Development Coordinator's (IDC) primary responsibility is to oversee curriculum and pedagogical quality. The IDC works with Course Coordinators and E-tutors to promote teaching excellence in the online and distance environments

Online and Distance Learning Instructional Specialists (ODLIS) provide pedagogical and andragogical training and guidance to faculty to improve the quality of faculty instructional practice for the promotion of excellence in online teaching and learning.

Staff Engagement

The Staff Engagement Framework outlines the in-service training programmes (ITP) for internal staff and adjunct facilitators in the Programme Delivery Department (PDD). It also addresses the faculty support services that forms part of staff engagement (Gilzene-Cheese, 2014). Providing staff with the relevant training is critical to developing their knowledge and competencies (UWIOC Annual Report 2013- 2014). For example, during the 2013/2014 academic year, UWIOC staff members took part in a variety of training sessions which served to strengthen their ability to effectively perform their duties. Teaching staff attended Training Workshops on best practices in the Learning Exchange, Course and E-tutor Management, and Standard Marking Systems.

The University embarked on the momentous task of revising the Grading system that was rolled out for the academic year 2014/15. UWIOC staff received training to ensure that everyone had an understanding of the revised grade point average (GPA) system and how it would impact the results of students' performance results. Training was designed especially for the teaching staff who was mandated to participate.

In addition to training and development, full time staff members are mandated to carry out research where applicable. Continued efforts are made to improve the UWIOC research agenda with the involvement of external stakeholders. One such effort is the partnership forged with the UWIOC and the University of Central Florida Centre for distributed Learning. A research network is now in place where selected staff members from both universities are working on research projects (UWIOC Annual Report 2013- 2014).

Quality Assurance for Course Delivery

Critical to the operations of the University is the issue of quality. At the delivery level, Quality Assurance measures, applicable to all UWIOC programmes and courses, including the Social Work programmes. Listed here are some of the measures:

- All facilitators are mandated to participate in in-service training and development relating to course delivery
- Facilitators are selected based on qualification and experience in the field of social work
- Minimum qualification of facilitators must be a degree at the masters level
- All major assessments are graded by assigned University examiners.
- All courses are evaluated by students. The evaluation instrument is placed in each course and carried out at mid, and the end of the semester.
- Course coordinators and e-tutors must submit a report on course delivery at the end of each semester.

At the programme level, programmes are evaluated through the University's Quality Assurance Unit. The process to evaluate the quality of programmes is a five yearly review cycle. The review is done on all programmes and courses, through a process that involves all UWIOC stakeholders.

Educational Resources

Most educational materials are made available to learners online for download. Where reference-required resources and reference texts are needed, it is the responsibility of students to obtain via online bookstore purchase or hard copy purchases at UWI Book Stores. Copies of all such reference texts are available for loan at the respective UWIOC site locations, or as electronic copies via the UWIOC Library.

The UWIOC Library Services provide a growing collection of electronic resources (databases, ebooks and ejournals), in a variety of subject areas, to support the work of UWIOC staff and students. These services are currently accessed in two ways, namely via the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) and the UWIOC list of electronic resources

The UWIOC Charter promise to its students is "to provide quality educational experience which promotes their academic and professional success, now and in the future". Commitment to that promise is demonstrated in the practices that are in place.

Methodology

The qualitative and quantitative methods were used to gather data for this case. The methods were deemed most appropriate as, according to Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, (1999), the use of qualitative and quantitative methods is necessary in order to collect and analyze more credible and valid data.

Data source

The sources for data gathering were survey from students and facilitators. The students' questionnaire was designed to capture their age range, gender, programme of study and experience with the team-teaching method. It comprised open and closed-ended, and a few yes/no questions. One question asked for their reflection, and, although not the focus of the study, a few questions on working in groups were included. Most of the closed-ended questions were collected with a Likert 4 point agree/disagree scale.

The facilitators' questionnaire comprised questions to get responses on the number of years teaching with the UWIOC, overall view of the team approach, and reflection on their experience. Like the students' instrument, the closed-ended questions were collected with a Likert 4 point agree/disagree scale, and a few yes/no questions. One question asked for their reflection.

Sample and data collection procedure

Students from the course, and the two facilitators were the participants in the case. The design of the students' questionnaire and collection of data was done using Survey Monkey. Survey Monkey is the approved Software used by the University to create, analyse, and publish all academic related survey. The purpose of the study did not warrant identification of the specific students who responded to the questions. Hence, using the Software was an advantage, in that regard as it allowed for anonymity of respondents.   The link to the questionnaire was disseminated to the students via email, and posting on the course page in the Learning Exchange during week ten of the semester, when it was assumed that they would have gained enough experience to share. The survey was circulated for three weeks, ending in the final week of the semester. A total of nineteen students responded to the survey which represented approximately 53% of the group.

The facilitators' survey was distributed to them electronically during the penultimate week of the semester. That week was selected as the teaching and learning period would be near completion, and the assumption was that they would have been in a position to share fulsome experience. The facilitators completed and returned the questionnaires electronically within a one week period.

The main challenge in collecting the data was from students as they were very slow to respond to the survey. At the end of week eleven, only 7 persons responded.   To ensure that enough students responded to represent the group, several reminders were sent via email.

Data Analysis

The use of Survey Monkey to conduct the data gathering, allowed for the closed-ended questions to be exported and analysed in Excel sheet.

Using the constant comparative method, responses to the open-ended questions were analysed in an effort to identify common themes and patterns from students' responses on the effectiveness of the team-teaching approach. The constant comparative method is used to develop concepts from data collected by coding and analyzing at the same time (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).   The same method was used to analyse the facilitators' data.

Findings

The purpose of the team-teaching approach was to identify its effectiveness and determine if it would be beneficial to students and facilitators. The main theme from the study is the timely feedback that the students received. From the students' perspective, the team-teaching experience was good. Compared to classes with only one facilitator, they found that having the team approach enhanced learning as they received individual attention and timely feedback. From the facilitators' perspective, they gained a stronger sense of collegiality, and the experience helped to improve their instructional practices. The findings suggest that team-teaching is an element of best practice that can be explored with a view to improving teaching and learning. While the focus of the study was on team-teaching, questions were included to get the students' views on working in groups. The result revealed that overall, majority of students preferred to work on their own rather than in groups.

Analysis of Facilitators' results

In terms of years of experience teaching at the UWIOC, one facilitator had zero to one year, and the other, two to four years. Neither had ever team taught before this experience, but they rated the approach as effective and an overall positive experience. Both responded that the communication between them was very good and they interchanged leadership roles at times.

Both strongly agreed that they got along well as team members, and that effort was made to determine who would take on sections of the instructional delivery.

One facilitator agreed that team-teaching helped her to better understand the course materials. This supports Letterman & Duggan, (2004) argument that team-teaching online also has many potential benefits for instructors as well. Just as it is beneficial for students to be exposed to different perspectives, teaching with a peer can afford co-teachers the opportunity, as well as the chance to engage more deeply in philosophical discussions about course content.

Facilitators' reflection on the team approach

The questionnaire included three questions that were designed to have the facilitators reflect on the process as well as their actions. Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on experiences, learn from them, and adapt, engaging in a process of continuous learning (Schön, 1983).

In their responses, both agreed that as a part of the experience, they have a stronger sense of collegiality in their daily work, and it has helped to improve their instructional practices. Palloff & Pratt, (2005) posit that the online environment is the perfect place for experts from different content areas to share scholarly resources and learn from one another. In addition, collaboration between peers can reduce the feeling of isolation that sometimes occurs in an online learning environment.

One facilitator commented that:

> *The tasks were shared among each e-tutor, that is: each e-tutor was given specific days to monitor the relevant forum, since students were not assigned electronically to an e-tutor on the learning exchange, which was done in previous years. This arrangement worked well and allowed for shared responsibilities between e-tutors.*

Another comment was:

> *This arrangement worked well in my opinion, and students were not disadvantaged in any way*

The idea for team-teaching was not part of the Department's initial delivery strategies. Therefore, enough time was not given for preparation, prior to the method being introduced. Research reveals that this is one area of team-teaching that poses a challenge if not executed well. Instructors should discuss which approach to use prior to the beginning of the class that makes the most sense for the content being introduced and choose the appropriate method (Scribner-MacLean & Miller, 2011). This gap came out in one facilitator's comment:

> *It was a very good experience, but there is the need to establish roles of each team member prior to the beginning of the semester, so that students are aware of what to expect.*

Analysis of students' results

Of the group, 53% of students completed the survey. 63% of respondents stated that it was their first time being taught by two facilitators in one course. 68% strongly agreed that the facilitators synchronized the course content very well, while 63% strongly agreed that the facilitators complemented each other very well.

In terms of how well they learn having two facilitators, 47% strongly agreed, 37% agreed, 11% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed. 61% strongly agreed and 39% agreed that they were satisfied with having both facilitators delivering the course.

In terms of preference, 68% did not have a preference for one facilitator over the other, and 89% responded that they were not confused about whom to go to for instructions/clarification. This was encouraging, and somewhat countered Wiesenberg, (2004) argument that oftentimes with two instructors, students get confused or take sides when they hear different perspectives and interpretations. On the question of enrolling in another co-teaching course, all responded that they would.

The students were asked if they were enrolled in other courses with only one facilitator, how it compared to this course with two facilitators.   These are some of their responses:

> *There was no comparison, having two facilitators enhanced my learning experience. Assistance was readily available, the small group encouraged individual participation. I enjoyed the experience and I wish all the courses would adopt this approach.*

> *Both ladies were caring, supportive, understanding, and professional. They came across as caring for and about their students and provided feedback on assignments which allows students to understand their strengths and weaknesses in comparison to my other facilitators.*

> *Not much of a difference. They all get their message across very well.*

> *This course gave you an option to communicate with either presenter, if it were that you were uncomfortable any one.*

Similarly to the facilitators, the students were asked to give comments, thoughts, or reflections. Their responses are as follows:

> *The presenters worked well together, I believed that each used their individual strengths. While one was providing feedback to me the other always provided encouragements and reminders. With regard to group work far too many members do not contribute, and when you do depending on your group leaders comment you lose marks. This was unfair.*

> *I think that having two facilitators allowed for quick feedback.*

> *Although there were 2 facilitators I felt that there were too many learning activities and the assignments too close together.*

> *I believe both facilitators complemented each other. Classes were interactive and provided a scope for relating to and understanding the principles being taught. They provided timely feedback and guidance as was needed. They should be commended for making learning a pleasurable and memorable activity.*

Questions on students' team work were included to gauge how well they worked together. The results were somewhat interesting as it revealed an overall preference for working individually rather than in groups.

On the matter of whether they learnt more by working in groups 42% disagreed, and 32% strongly disagreed. Only 16% strongly agreed and 10% agreed that they learnt more by working in a group than on their own.

Similar trend was shown in terms of completing assignments, as 47% disagreed that it was easier to complete assignment as a group, and 16% strongly agreed that it was easier.

Discussion

The overall performance of the students in the course was good with a pass rate of 81%, but lower than the 2013/2014 cohort, where the pass rate was 93%. As mentioned previously, cohort one was a much larger group with 117 students, compared to 36 who completed in cohort two. With approximately 70% reduction in enrolment, coupled with the team-teaching method, the expectation would have been for improved performance. If the results were the only basis on which the team-teaching method was being measured, the conclusion would be that it was not effective. However, other factors that are not within the scope of this case would have to be examined to determine the reason(s) for the variation. Of note is that during the middle of the semester, two students indicated that they would not be able to complete the course due to illness and personal issues. At the end of the semester, an additional two students were not able to submit their final paper, citing illness as the main reason. The incomplete grades of these four students accounted for the overall pass fail rate.

Literature does not elaborate on, or stress the performance outcome as it relates to team-teaching. Hence, the measurements in this case are the overall benefits that students gained. Day & Hurrell (2012) identified some unique students' benefits such as dual perspectives, modelling of collegial pedagogy, flexibility of approach, heightened engagement and the opportunity to see true collaboration in action.

The response of the facilitators and students indicated that there was harmony in the delivery. In their experiment with co-teaching, Wilson & Linder-VanBerschot (2014) stated that as co-instructors, they communicated a lot behind the scenes so that students perceived them as a united front. They further stated that one of the obvious advantages of having two instructors in an online course is the additional support that can be provided to students. This supports these statements from the students:

> *Having two facilitators made learning a lot easier; we received individual attention and our concerns were dealt with promptly.*

The presenters worked well together, I believed that each used their individual strengths. While one was providing feedback to me the other always provided encouragements and reminders.

They should be commended for making learning a pleasurable and memorable activity

It was an exciting class this semester.

The two facilitators were well received. If I had a problem or question I could seek out one of the teachers if I couldn't reach the other.

While the overall responses from the case are positive, the negative side to team-teaching must not be overlooked. Davis, (1995) warned that team-teaching is not without its difficulties or problems for staff. For many academic staff, it is seen as time consuming and difficult to organize. Conflict can arise if there is uncertainty or disagreement in the role of each team member Letterman & Dugan (as cited in Buzzetto-Moore, 2007).

Conclusion

The main theme from the findings resonates, as 'timely feedback' happens to be one of The UWIOC's key teaching objectives. It is therefore encouraging to identify how that objective can be met more effectively. The findings will be shared with the PDD team who are integral to the teaching and learning process. The aim is to sensitize them to the concept of, and potential benefits of teach-teaching. Their feedback, along with the affirmation already received from students and facilitators will help to determine if the practice can be applied to other courses.

The UWIOC is dedicated to having the most experienced and dedicated facilitators to adequately serve the students. To recruit and retain such facilitators is to build capacity. One of the benefits that may be derived from team-teaching is to have e-tutors model the Course Coordinators, thereby increasing the pool of expert facilitators. According to Wilson & Linder-VanBerschot (2014) the most powerful benefit of the co-teaching experience may be in the opportunity to build capacity within a course, as well as within instructors, and fostering more innovation than traditional methods. Buzzetto-Moore (2007) admonishes that administrators may be myopic with regards to the potential benefit of team-teaching as a means to mentor and support succession planning in the faculty. Further, the benefits and values in terms of professional development and growth are rarely factored into the equation, but it is important that the benefits are weighed against the costs to consider the role of staff in the faculty, the quality of the teaching and learning activities and the students learning outcomes.

There are limitations to the study, as it focused on only one group of students and two facilitators from the overall enrolment and teaching staff of the Campus' population. It is clear that more research is needed to fully determine the benefits and concerns related to co-teaching, particularly in an online setting. According to the Hanover Research Institute (2012), co-teaching is a mode of instructional delivery whose effectiveness has yet to be examined on a large-scale, controlled and rigorous study. Many laud its various benefits, but its true impact on academic and social achievement—in terms of quantitatively-measured outcomes—remains largely unknown.

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