

## Team Teaching in Social Work Education: A Pedagogical Approach to Modeling Inclusion

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### Abstract

Innovation in social work education and practice is necessary to ensure adequate preparation of MSW students entering the profession. As MSW students enter micro, mezzo, and macro practice settings, there is a growing need for social work education to enhance inclusive representation—beginning in the classroom. MSW students from increasingly diverse backgrounds need intersectional modeling and representation to learn how to integrate academic theoretical social work skills with their personal lived experiences. Restructuring traditional single teacher classrooms to construct team-teaching partnerships promotes pedagogical innovation, creates intersectional visibility, and prepares students for inclusive practices in the profession (Dill, Shera & Webber, 2017). This study surveyed Masters of Social Work (MSW) students (n = 237) in courses co-taught by instructors differing in intersectional identities, skills, and experiences. While team-teaching activated anxiety in some students due to uncertainty and ambivalence, most reflected the strengths they identified as engagement, diverse perspectives, collaboration, and communication they saw modeled by their instructors. This research validates team teaching (or co-teaching) as an opportunity for the provision of innovative pedagogy while promoting inclusion and collaborative representation.

**Keywords:** Team teaching, co-teaching, inclusion, social work education

A lack of innovation in social work practice is attributed to the foundational trifecta on which the profession is built (Traube, Begun, Okpych & Choy-Brown, 2017). Traube et al. (2017) identify the trifecta as 1) the structure of social work education, 2) diffusively focused professional organizations, and 3) siloed professional environments. The erosion of innovation due to the confluence of these three areas leaves academic, social work research as the focus of innovation rather than practice (Traube et al., 2017). Social work research is relied on as the source of innovation in the field; however, it does not often reach across the curriculum (Traube et al., 2017). In instances where research does impact the social work curriculum, it frequently misses human behavior, practice, and field contexts, depriving students with the opportunity to grapple with the challenge of implementing research protocols with vulnerable populations. In order to promote inclusion and equity for the most underserved and marginalized groups, social work must actively engage with innovation to improve its practice and services (Traube et al., 2017).

Team teaching is one innovation that has not received much attention at the post-secondary level, in general, and social work education in particular (Zapf, Jerome & Williams, 2011). Collaborative teaching among social work educators is not uncommon. Team teaching in social work education can take many forms, including teaching with multiple educators in the same classroom, teaching different sections of the same course, or collaborating on the field education team (Dill, Shera & Webber, 2017). Educating social work students about working collaboratively in teams and preparing them to communicate effectively to foster team alliances is an important concept to explore within the classroom learning environment and field education experience (Dill et al., 2017). Preparedness for practice requires social work educators to offer rich learning opportunities that support student's understanding and development of well-functioning teamwork skills (Dill et al., 2017). This paper explores the idea of restructuring the traditional single teacher classroom structure within social work education. Also addressed in this paper are the concepts of team teaching in social work as a springboard for

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cultivating pedagogical innovations, mentoring and coaching newer faculty, ensuring field readiness for nascent social work practitioners, and opposition to team teaching (Dill et al., 2017).

### **Team Teaching**

The field of social work is a natural fit for team teaching in instruction because the very nature of the professional environment is one where social work professionals actively collaborate with clients and stakeholders at all levels of practice (Robinson, Bachelor-Robinson & McCaskill, 2012). An inherent aspect of team collaboration in social work that continues to develop and has been the subject of much attention is the creation and implementation of interdisciplinary teams (McAuliffe, 2009). Social work is based on the fundamental belief that team collaboration is essential for competent practice (McAuliffe, 2009). At a basic level, team teaching is the notion of more than one teacher responsible for educating a group of students and cooperative engagement between instructor interactions (Zapf et al., 2011). The limited accounts of team teaching in social work education found within academic scholarship, argue that teams comprised of instructors with differing cultural backgrounds, genders, practice orientations, and experiences bring together in the classroom diverse perspectives on the same subject (Zapf et al., 2011).

### **Classroom Learning**

Social work colleagues who join together to teach a course as a team, create and foster a space for intellectual stimulation and growth among students while simultaneously challenging dominant ideologies about power and authority within the classroom setting (Zapf et al., 2011). Zapf et al. (2011) claim that having more than one teacher in the classroom disrupts traditional student approaches to meeting expectations of an individual authority or expert and forces them to think for themselves (Zapf et al., 2011). The team teaching approach offers a model to students for how to engage in discussions when there are differing opinions and the sharing of power and authority within the classroom space. Team teachers who are diverse in a range of political orientations, values, social work field, and research experiences, and hold different personal lived experiences with oppression, both as oppressors and oppressed, produce students that are better equipped to critically appraise challenging topics containing diverse perspectives (Garra, Aymer, Gelman & Miller, 2015; Zapf et al., 2011). However, social work students' education is not limited to the classroom. Students are held accountable for learning to navigate both the academic university setting and the practice-based agency setting—illustrative of the struggle that social work has as a discipline, striving both for academic respectability and professional recognition (Durkin & Shergill, 2000).

### **Field Education**

The field education teaching team is often overlooked as an essential component of social work education (Dill et al., 2017). The teaching team comprised of the field liaison, field instructor, and sometimes preceptor(s) is instrumental in helping shape and support the burgeoning social worker as they begin their initial practice in varied social work settings (Dill et al., 2017). The utility of the field education teaching team owes its success in part to the structure of the team itself. As noted in Beder (2000), theory, along with other things academic, tend to recede from consciousness for the practicing social worker as they launch their professional practice, their academic orientation takes a backseat to applied practice issues that consume their time. Consequently, agency-based field instructors alone may not have the time or aptitude to recognize and then teach an integrated approach to social work practice and theory (Murdock, Ward, Ligon & Jindani, 2006).

To bridge the gap between theory and practice education for field instructors, and ultimately for students, universities provide training to field instructors in efforts to reignite their academic orientation and its theories back to consciousness (Beder, 2000). Also, the faculty field liaison, who is often a seasoned practitioner and whom may also teach academic courses, further supports the field instructor's awareness of academic content and its application in practice (Dill et al., 2017). Team teaching with academics and practitioners offers students opportunities to prepare themselves for social work practice. The faculty field liaison and the field instructor offer students role modeling for collaboration, communication, and conflict resolution in team teaching, expanding the traditional definition of the social work academic (Dill et al., 2017).

### **Faculty Mentorship**

Presently, social work education prepares the beginning practitioner; however, it does not offer preparation for becoming a classroom teacher of social work education or as an agency-based field instructor (Murdock et al., 2006). There are several unintended benefits for team teaching members. These benefits include the opportunity to learn from colleagues, to respond to others' material, and to have them challenge one's own, as well as exchange knowledge and skills from each other's grading practices and teaching methods (Zapf et al., 2011). This sharing of expertise promotes

relationships that foster a deeper level of trust and respect between colleagues that serve to develop better the teacher and professional among team teaching members (Zapfet al., 2011).

Social work teachers with more considerable experience can support and coach newer faculty members on how to manage challenging classroom situations or manage and support students who present myriad issues that are unfamiliar to the new teacher (Dill et al., 2017). It is argued that, if supported by university administrators, team teaching can become a mentoring opportunity for newer faculty to take advantage of the knowledge of more seasoned faculty members. Deans and directors who wish to enhance teaching excellence, provide mentorship for new faculty members, and provide greater team cohesion in the social work department should create a strategic focus on team teaching. By working in silos, we diminish the opportunity to work collectively toward teaching excellence. Social work administrators who cultivate and support team teaching reap the benefits and rewards of implementing these strategies. Leadership by administrators includes supporting educators to create space for meeting as a team (Dill et al., 2017, p. 213).

### **Opposition to Team Teaching**

In the initial stages of the team teaching experience, teachers can expect some opposition from students (Zapfet al., 2011). These students may be operating from a place of consumer entitlement. As consumers of an academic degree, they may feel threatened by the lack of understanding of structural differences between team-taught and single teacher classrooms (Zapfet al., 2011). Students who see themselves as consumers but not as learners may only be interested to know how to 'purchase' an "A" in the course (Zapfet al., 2011). Some students are looking to know what they need to memorize rather than engaging in reflective dialogue with themselves and others (Zapfet et al., 2011). Students may also hold the perception that a single instructor or expert in a course is legitimate as they have been 'trained' and institutionalized to believe there is only one way of receiving an education—that is, by a single expert (Zapfet al., 2011). The academy can also oppose team teaching on account of the dominant institutional values of single teacher classes (Zapfet al., 2011).

This study explored the experiences of Masters of Social Work students ( $n = 237$ ) enrolled in social work courses taught using a team teaching approach. Through a mixed-methods, pre and post-course survey, the authors sought to explore the results of implementing a team teaching model in social work classes to identify what students perceive as advantages and disadvantages with this teaching approach.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Participants included second-year students enrolled in three courses taught in the Masters of Social Work program; the courses selected were Trauma, Family Therapy, and Practice in Multicultural Settings. These courses were selected based on instructor and student feedback regarding the challenge of learning rigorous content with emotionally charging material. Based on their registration time, students selected their courses and were aware they were registering for a co-taught class. None of the participants had previous experience in a co-taught academic course prior to this program. Participants ( $n=237$ ) were provided with a link to complete the pre-test at the beginning and post-tests at the end of each respective course. A total of 141 participants completed the pre-test, and 96 completed the post-test. All participants were full-time MSW students. Demographic information was not requested from students who agreed to participate in the study.

### **Procedure**

Pre-test and post-test surveys consisted of qualitative and quantitative questions that explored student's experiences in a team-taught course. Responses were listed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'Not Effective At All' to 'Extremely Effective,' with a text box following each question for narrative comments. Data on co-taught courses were collected over three years, between 2016 and 2019. Surveys were distributed exclusively to students enrolled in a team-taught class. Students were initially invited to participate in the study via email and encouraged to complete the pre-test before the start of the semester. Students were informed that they would be provided with a post-test upon completion of the course at the end of the semester. Students who agreed to participate in the study were allotted time on the first day of class to complete the survey if they had not done so before starting the course. Students were also provided time during class on the final day of the course to complete the post-test survey. The survey took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete, with no incentives offered to participants.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics allowed for summarization and description of the quantitative data. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the qualitative data. Thematic analysis, a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data, provides a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). Grounded theory methods provide systematic procedures for shaping quantitative and qualitative data and unite the research process with theoretical development (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007).

## Results

The primary purpose of the present study is to explore the research question: *What are the perceived barriers and facilitators of implementing a team teaching model within social work classes?* Data gathered from questionnaires administered to social work students to explore their perceptions were drawn and arranged into categories, themes, patterns, and relationships emerging from and grounded in data with an a priori focus on two themes: *barriers* (to the implementation of a team teaching model of instruction within social work classes), and *facilitators* (to the implementation of a team teaching model of instruction within social work classes). Qualitative data analysis was conducted through the use of Qualtrics data analysis software program.

Based on thematic analysis, five categories were identified as recurring topics relevant to participant's perceptions of barriers and facilitators of implementing a team teaching model of instruction within social work classes. The categories were grouped into two major themes. One theme describes advantages and facilitators (diverse perspectives, collaboration and communication, and engagement). A second theme describes barriers and disadvantages (ambivalence and fidelity to tradition). The following sections describe the themes and categories derived from the surveys and are illustrated with the use of participant quotations.

### Theme 1- Advantages and Facilitators

By far, there were a more significant number of identified advantages to facilitate the implementation of a team teaching model of instruction within social work classes than there were barriers and perceived disadvantages. Categories identified as advantages included diverse perspectives, collaboration and communication, and engagement. The literature on co-teaching illustrates that a team-teaching approach allows instructors to teach content and model professional behavior (Garran, Aymer, Gelman & Miller, 2015; Zapf et al., 2011). In so doing, this helps prepare students for challenging dynamics involving diverse perspectives and exposing them to social workers from different cultural backgrounds, genders, practice experiences, and orientations, mirroring experiences they are likely to encounter in the field.

#### *Diverse Perspectives*

Participants were asked during both the pre-test and post-test to identify how effective they thought the co-facilitating/co-teaching model would be in exposing them to class experiences and dynamics that would promote learning. At the pre-test, 47.52% of students felt that co-facilitating/co-teaching would be '*Somewhat Effective*' in exposing them to experiences and knowledge. For instance, one participant stated, "I believe that having two professors will give us the opportunity to learn from a wide variety of experiences." However, at the post-test, 55.21% of participants felt that this teaching model was '*Effective*.' One participant explained: "I enjoyed learning from a lecture-style classroom, and I feel like both teachers were knowledgeable and brought insightful information."

Participants were also asked to apply the same five-point scale to rate how effective the co-teaching model would be in establishing classroom dynamics that promote learning. At the pre-test, 37.24% of participants expressed uncertainty about the model's effectiveness, with most student ratings falling under the '*Somewhat Effective*' and '*Not Effective*' categories. One participant stated, "I have no idea what to expect" whereas another participant said, "I feel that co-teaching will provide more interesting dynamics and more experience." Comparatively, post-test responses reflect that 46.88% of participants felt that the co-facilitating/co-teaching model was '*Very Effective*' in establishing classroom dynamics that promote learning, with most students responding with '*Effective*' ratings or higher. A student response included the following comment: "I was able to gain two perspectives from two different professors that are highly skilled. It allowed me to gain different skills."

#### *Collaboration and Communication*

Collaboration and effective communication to build rapport and foster alliances are crucial components to MSW classroom settings, field education, and post-graduation as professional practitioners. Participants were asked what they thought collaboration in teaching looked like, and what they expected from their instructors regarding communication.

Consistent with previous data, at pre-test 34.04% of participants initially indicated they were unclear about what co-teaching entailed stating, “I am not sure,” and “I am not too sure what would make this effective,” or “I think co-teaching is professors switch off teaching the class?” Students also indicated not being familiar with a team teaching model of classroom instruction, given that they had no prior experience in a team-taught course. One student stated, “I have not experienced the co-teaching model.” Another student responded, “Unknown at this time, this is my first [co-taught] class.”

Conversely, at the completion of the course, 69.8% of participants’ responses reflected clarity of understanding and positive association with team teaching models. One participant explained: “I would describe co-teaching as having two professors/facilitators to provide students with more diverse experiences, knowledge, and perspective.” Another student described team teaching as instructors engaging in “Communication and mutual respect.” In addition, students voiced concern that individual faculty may not be effective in a co-teaching model prior to initiating a co-taught course. At the pre-test, 44.03% of students felt that instructors would be ‘*Not Effective*’ in comparison to post-test results, in which 65.3% of students felt that the individual faculty were ‘*Extremely Effective*’. Post-test results suggest that when faculty effectively communicate expectations about co-teaching models to students, they are more prepared to engage in course collaboration with two instructors and with each other. Narrative comments expressing these perspectives include: “When the professors empower each other and the learning material is enhanced through their experiences” and “The professors’ cohesion and synchrony. It was very helpful that my professors had similar expectations and teaching styles. In addition, you could tell that they had a lot of experience speaking and lecturing together, which made classes run smoothly.”

### ***Engagement***

Co-teaching approaches allow students to gain a better understanding of different ways to engage with colleagues that may have different opinions as well as seeing how one can share power and authority in the classroom setting. The co-facilitating survey explored what factors made for the most effective learning environment. At the pre-test, participants indicated that they felt engagement and interaction between instructors and students would support an optimal learning environment. For example, one student stated, “I have not experienced a co-teaching class before. I would assume the most effective learning environment is the one that is very interactive and innovative.”

However, at the post-test, participants stated that they felt like engagement and collaboration between instructors was a critical component to successful co-teaching. One participant explained, “Two professors who can work simultaneously and when it doesn’t seem like one professor is overpowering the other.” Participants also noted that they observed instructors professionally engaging through this approach, managing power, privilege, and authority through their interactions. Another student commented, “Both professors connect and share the same vision and also that they allow each other ample space to share their own language of the material.”

### **Theme 2- Barriers and Disadvantages**

The results of thematic data analysis also rendered some identifiable barriers and disadvantages to facilitate the implementation of a team teaching model of instruction within social work classes—albeit far less than the perceived advantages and facilitators. Categories identified as disadvantages included ambivalence and fidelity to tradition. Consistent with the literature, students expressed ambivalence and opposition prior to beginning a co-taught course (Zapf et al., 2011).

#### ***Ambivalence***

At the pre-test, 50.71% of participants indicated they felt ambivalent towards co-teaching for their classes. Students indicated they were concerned with what they felt uncertain or unclear about, including their understanding of the approach, two professors teaching as a team, grading expectations, teaching effectiveness, and ambiguous expectations from the professors or concerning classroom dynamics. Students expressed their ambivalence about team teaching as indicated in their responses including statements such as, “I have no idea what to expect,” and “I am not sure,” or “I am not sure, I don’t understand how it will work.” However, once students were fully immersed in the co-teaching experience, this seemed to contribute towards a positive shift in student’s perception of this teaching method. This claim is attributed to a vast majority of students expressing interest in enrolling in additional co-taught classes and suggesting the MSW program offer more co-teaching courses. Moreover, post-test results yielded a 44.21% participant response rate indicating that co-teaching was ‘*Extremely Effective*.’

#### ***Fidelity to Tradition***

Any modification from traditional teaching models may evoke opposition from students (Zapf et al., 2011). Participants were asked to consider traditional teaching models and encouraged to comment on how they felt co-teaching compared to traditional models. Specifically, they were asked if they felt that team teaching would be effective in exposing them to experiences, skills, and knowledge and how effective and fair they felt grading would be. One student expressed their concern about grading in this manner: “The only reason I think the grading may not be as fair is because one professor may grade his or her students easier than others.” The primary concerns addressed by participants were regarding grading and class size. Another student stated, “I worry that when turning in an assignment I might be listening to what one professor said during lecture, and then I will not gain full credit due to it not being what my assigned professor is looking for.” Additionally, another student stated, “I am only concerned about larger class (more students) with less comfortable atmosphere.” At the pre-test, 42.03% of students indicated that a co-teaching model would be ‘*Somewhat Effective*’ in skill attainment and fairness in grading.

On the other hand, this perspective shifted significantly at the post-test when participants asserted the co-teaching model was 42.71% ‘*Effective*’ in the area of experience, skills, and knowledge attainment, as well as fairness in grading. It is noteworthy to address that many participants remained ambivalent at the completion of the co-taught course, primarily concerned about fairness in grading procedures. For example, participants stated, “I am confused about the grading because sometimes they [instructors] would switch it up during the semester,” and “I believe it can be hard to have two professors grading us since they have different ways of teaching, although it seems fair.” This ambivalence could potentially be attributed to their experiences in the course or because final grades had not yet been assigned. Consistently, participants acknowledged a lack of clarity (in grading expectations) and confusion as a rationale for ongoing ambivalence about the co-teaching approach. Furthermore, they highlighted class size as an environmental factor of concern, noting that more students felt unsafe with a larger, less intimate class size than other courses with fewer students. A student expressed this concern by stating, “The grading was fine. However, the class is too large, making it difficult to establish a safe space and a fluid classroom dynamic.”

### Discussion

In the present study, categories identified and thematically coded as advantages and facilitators to the implementation of a team-teaching model of instruction within social work classes included diverse perspectives, collaboration and communication, and engagement. These categories emerged as a theme reflected in the pages of scholarly literature regarding co-teaching. That is, to prepare social work students to engage in collaborative practice by applying a teamteaching approach allows instructors from different cultural and professional backgrounds to teach content from diverse perspectives while simultaneously communicate and model professional behavior during course instruction (Garran, Aymer, Gelman & Miller, 2015; Zapf et al., 2011).

In contrast, categories identified and thematically coded as barriers and disadvantages to the implementation of a teamteaching model of instruction within social work classes, included ambivalence and fidelity to tradition. Like previous studies examining team teaching, before starting the course, students underscored their uncertainty and opposition to deviating from the traditional solo-taught class to a class taught by a team of teachers, suggesting that new and innovative approaches may initially be uncomfortable to students. Any academic modifications that diverge from the status quo are likely to be questioned, criticized, and rejected until students can experience the benefit of the adaptation. Moreover, several participants remained ambivalent about their grades at the end of the course. Similarly, Zapf et al. (2011) found that students who identify as academic consumers rather than learners were more likely to focus on grades and legitimated a single instructor as an expert instead of a team of teachers.

### Implications for Social Work Education

The traditional single teacher classroom structure within social work education that exists today may require restructuring and a more collaborative approach similar to that of the field education teaching team. Arguably, most academic institutions develop partnerships with field-based agencies in which their primary responsibility is to provide students with classroom theory and research knowledge, inevitably placing sole responsibility on field-based agencies to provide practice experience and ‘professional’ development, which often becomes a context in which students address performance deficits. A more collaborative approach between universities and agencies, classroom teachers, and field practitioners may offer a more equitable sharing of responsibility for the overall development of social work students (Durkin & Shergill, 2000).

Classroom collaboration can be reflected through team teaching, which promotes the inclusion, equity, and modeling that is missing from traditional academic contexts. Team teaching in social work education diminishes isolated work environments, cultivates pedagogical innovation, creates mentoring opportunities for newer faculty, and prepares social work students for professional practice (Dill et al., 2017).

### Limitations

One of the significant limitations encountered with the study was the inconsistency in the number of participants that participated in the pre and post-tests, with over 40 more pre-tests (n=141) than post-tests (n=96). Those responses may have impacted the data in ways we cannot assess. Additionally, the co-facilitating/co-teaching model did not collect student's demographic information, which may have helped add depth and understanding related to how ambivalence may be experienced by differing intersectional identities (including but not limited to gender, age, nationality, and gender identity). Also, given that students are accustomed and conditioned to experience teaching through a traditional single teacher model, a co-teaching model of education may have been experienced as foreign and overwhelming. Because there were three separate classes surveyed, the specific courses and individual instructors may factor into how students might have received the co-teaching model.

Furthermore, teachers themselves are equally trained and conditioned to teach independently, and consequently, students may have picked up on the instructor's potential ambivalence about co-teaching. However, to minimize threats to validity and establish trustworthiness, a data triangulation method was applied to the study (Padgett, 2017). That is, data collected in this study included information from three different courses taught by three distinct teams of teachers to support the findings.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the experiences of Masters of Social Work students enrolled in social work courses taught using a team-teaching approach. With social justice, inclusion, and intersectionality as fundamental foundations of the discipline, it is critical that course instruction models the skills, values, and perspective students are expected to develop. In addition, MSW students from increasingly diverse backgrounds working with vulnerable clients and populations need intersectional representation to support the integration of academic theoretical social work skills with personal lived experiences. Results reflected that while team-teaching initially activated anxiety in some students due to uncertainty and ambivalence, the majority of participants indicated the strength of the approach, including increased engagement, diverse perspectives, collaboration, and professional communication they saw modeled by their instructors. This research validates team (or co-teaching) as an opportunity for the provision of innovative pedagogy while promoting inclusion and collaborative representation.

### Future Research

Although some research in social work education explores the concept of team teaching in the classroom, additional investigations examining the connection between team teaching in the social work classroom environment and the field-based setting is necessary. Further qualitative and quantitative research on the relationship and partnership between the academy and field agencies and their contributions to the student's learning experience is also an area requiring more attention. Lastly, an exploration of the benefits a team-teaching approach may have for new faculty onboarding and mentoring in social work education is warranted.

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