

Stronger Together: PLCs and Co-Teaching Teams for Sequenced Peer Teaching

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Introduction/Need for innovation

Pedagogical decision-making, collaboration with peers, and coherent instruction are essential skills for preservice and in-service teachers. For in-service teachers, many of these skills are practiced within professional learning communities (PLCs), intended to promote shared inquiry and responsibility for student learning (Vescio et al., 2008). However, teacher preparation programs often prioritize individual unit and lesson planning practice, peer teaching, and reflection. Although individual practice is important, this structure can limit opportunities for collaborative evaluation and justification of pedagogical approaches to instruction, and to coherence across lessons in a unit. This is especially important in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teaching methods courses, where preservice teachers must learn to design instruction for their diverse learners through targeted practice with core tasks of teaching (Grossman et al., 2009). Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) backward design approach emphasizes coherence among goals, assessment, and instruction across a unit, however individual disconnected peer teaching doesn't provide opportunity to practice design of units of instruction. To address this need, the ag teaching methods course implemented a team-based learning approach. The novel contribution of this innovation is the integration of PLCs, consisting of co-teaching teams, that facilitate sequenced peer teaching to move microteaching from isolated individual lessons toward collaborative, coherent unit-level instruction. There were several goals for this innovation: (a) provide structured opportunities for learners to engage in discourse about instructional decisions within the context of their lesson and unit, (b) strengthen learners' planning skills through more opportunities for targeted practice with unit planning, lesson planning, teaching, and reflection, and (c) reinforce coherent instructional sequencing.

How it works

Learners are organized into PLCs, and each PLC includes three co-teaching teams. PLCs collaborate to develop a shared unit plan, while co-teaching teams develop one lesson within the larger unit sequence. Faculty begin by revising the course syllabus, assignment templates, and rubrics to align with the PLC/co-teaching structure.

Figure 1

PLC and Co-Teaching Structure for Implementing Sequenced Peer Teaching

Phase	Faculty Role	Learner Role
Clarify Task	Introduce the PLC/co-teacher approach during the initial class meeting.	Establish PLC and co-teacher teams, and establish team norms.
Model Unit Coherence	Model a sample unit and three-lesson sequence to demonstrate how lessons connect across a unit. Introduce instructional routines such as entry/exit routines and accountable talk routines.	Analyze how the sample lessons build toward shared unit goals. Debrief the learning sequence and review provided unit and lesson plans.
Define success criteria	Review sample unit plans, lesson plans, teaching videos, and rubrics to build a shared understanding of quality work.	Apply success criteria to planning, teaching, and reflection tasks.

Plan the Unit and Lessons	Provide templates, resources, feedback in the design phase prior to teaching. Monitor and adjust scaffolding as the term progresses.	PLCs develop the unit plan. Co-teacher teams design one lesson within the unit sequence and make revisions based on feedback.
Teach in Sequence	Observe peer teaching and manage feedback transitions between lessons.	Co-teacher teams teach their lessons. Audience members participate.
Reflect and give feedback	Facilitate reflection and feedback mechanisms.	Co-teacher teams complete a whole-class verbal and an individual written reflection. Classmates provide plus-delta written feedback.

Results to date/Implications

This innovation was tested in a class of 13 learners, who met for two three-hour class sessions per week. The approach increased opportunities for targeted practice with unit planning, lesson planning, and peer teaching from two peer-taught lessons in previous years to six with this new format. Informal student feedback indicated learners valued the opportunity to collaborate on instructional planning and teaching. The following term, faculty supervising full-time clinical practice, along with cooperating teachers, noted that this cohort of student teachers was more prepared to develop unit plans than previous students. After completing full-time clinical practice, learners also informally shared that the PLC structure helped them practice collaboration as a real-world skill for entering the teaching profession and allowed them to speak to this skill during job interviews. These results suggest the model can strengthen preservice teachers' ability to plan coherent instruction, collaborate with colleagues, and connect individual lessons within a larger unit sequence.

Future plans/Advice

Instructors considering this innovation should identify methods for ensuring individual accountability. Although PLCs and co-teaching teams strengthened collaboration and created opportunities for learners to justify pedagogical decisions, future iterations will add individual formative assessments before the capstone project to make learners' skill progression more transparent across the term. Instructors should also consider pacing, as assigned preparation before class allowed more time for applying learning during microteaching lessons. To operationalize this, expectations for teaching skills must be scaffolded across the term rather than held static across all peer-teaching episodes to account of the incorporation of new learning. Future revisions will clarify weekly expectations for unit and lesson plan components, use existing authentic student samples to illustrate quality planning, and offer office-hour debriefs as an option for targeted feedback.

Costs/Resources

Initial direct costs are limited to instructor labor for revising syllabi, LMS modules, assignment instructions, rubrics, and PLC/co-teaching materials (estimated 2-5 hours). Continuing indirect costs include class time for explaining the structure, modeling unit coherence, facilitating peer teaching, and supporting reflection (varies by context).

References

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