

# Co-Teaching ... Not Just a Textbook Term: Implications for Practice

Emily C. Bouck

**ABSTRACT:** The author investigated the construction of a co-teaching collaboration between a general education and special education teacher in 2 8th-grade United States history classes. The teachers' roles, the spaces they shared and divided, as well as the affordances and constraints inherent in this service delivery option are discussed. The results of this investigation both support and extend previous findings and demonstrate that conversations between co-teaching partners are beneficial to addressing issues of roles, providing instruction, and handling classroom management and discipline, as well as issues such as loss of professional autonomy. Finally, the results suggest that researchers should next explore how co-taught classrooms affect student outcomes.

**KEY WORDS:** *co-teaching, collaboration, inclusion, roles*

DIEKER AND MURAWSKI (2003) described *co-teaching* as two or more teachers who are equal in status located in the classroom together, working together, and providing instruction. Despite its intuitive appeal, co-teaching has been depicted and discussed in multiple ways. Cook and Friend (1995) defined *co-teaching* as "two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of students in a single physical space" (p. 2). Cook and Friend (2000) also described five models of co-teaching. These models included (a) one teacher and one assistant or one teacher drifting (one teacher primarily delivers instruction); (b) station teaching (both teachers deliver content to "stations" of children); (c) parallel teaching (teachers plan together but split the class and deliver content to groups); (d) alternative teaching (one teacher works with smaller groups to preteach, reteach, or supplement regular instruction); and (e) team teaching (teachers share instruction for the entire class). Although any of those models could be used within a classroom situation, Cook and Friend (1995) suggested that the ideal model involves both teachers collaborating on all components of the educational process.

Researchers (e.g., Weiss & Lloyd, 2003) have shown that the nuances of co-teaching are determined by factors such as scheduling, the content knowledge of special education teachers, the acceptance by general education teachers, and the philosophies of both teachers in regard to classroom management. Weiss and Lloyd found that a majority of co-teaching consisted of general education teachers teaching the content and special education teachers serving as aides. Weiss and Lloyd indicated that the activity of the special education teacher within a co-taught setting was partially defined by the characteristics of the teachers, such as their content knowledge, choice in the teaching arrangement, and negotiation of roles and responsibilities.

In addition to understanding how the details of co-teaching are negotiated, other researchers have tried to determine which factors are associated with successful co-teaching. Walther-Thomas, Bryant, and Land (1996) identified several features related to successful co-teaching. Those features included teachers' willingness and capability, and a balanced list of students in the class to ensure a heterogeneous mixture of students. The researchers emphasized that teachers should volunteer for co-teaching assignments. Planning time, at least once a week, was also connected with having a successful co-teaching situation, in that both teachers could plan the lessons or materials together (Walther-Thomas, Bryant, & Land).

Others in the field echoed the need for a common planning time (Arguelles, Hughes, & Schumm, 2000; Dieker & Murawski, 2003). Arguelles and colleagues interviewed teachers engaged in co-teaching relationships and found that teachers value having time to plan together, daily if possible. The teachers also commented on the need for the co-teachers to be flexible and compatible in terms of

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philosophies and even teaching styles. Arguelles and colleagues also indicated that teachers see a value in clearly defined roles and responsibilities. A need to discuss students as *ours*, not *mine*, *yours*, *his*, or *hers* was also noted frequently. The use of the word *ours* avoids turf wars that Bauwens and Hourcade (1995) warned are a barrier to successful co-teaching.

### Rationale for Study

The ability of general education and special education teachers to work together in co-taught classrooms is of increasing importance because more special education students are gaining access to the general education curriculum through co-taught general education classes. The opportunity for special education students to gain access to the general education curriculum and classes has received increased attention because the federal legislation No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandated that all students, including special education students, be evaluated with state and district assessments, based on state standards (NCLB, 2001/2002). Furthermore, the recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2004) mandated that special education teachers need to be highly qualified, and co-teaching affords a solution beyond having every special education teacher who teaches more than one subject certified in multiple core content areas. When special education teachers are co-teaching, they are, in theory, collaborating with a highly qualified teacher.

### Method

#### Setting

The research site used was a middle school in an urban school district in Michigan. Two co-taught eighth-grade United States history classrooms were included in the study; both classes were co-taught by the same general education social studies teacher and special education teacher (see Table 1 for demographic information).

### Participants

Two teachers were selected for participation in the study. The two teachers had voluntarily agreed to co-teach together in two eighth-grade United States history classes. This experience was their first year co-teaching together, although both had previous experiences with other teachers. One teacher was a general education social studies teacher and taught United States history to eighth graders throughout the school day, including honors, typical, and then the co-taught classes. The other teacher was a special education teacher. She taught the 2 hr of co-taught United States history as well as reading during the other hours of the day to strictly special education students in small, pull-out classes. The teachers were similar in that they were both Caucasian, both teaching less than 4 years, and were relatively similar in age; however, they were of different gender. The one main difference was that it was the special education teacher's first year with the content. The two teachers were selected because it was their first year of co-teaching together, and they were still in the process of coming to understand their relationship and how they constructed a co-taught classroom within this content area. In addition to teaching two classes together, the teachers shared a common planning time in the afternoon.

### Researcher's Role

The role of the researcher was that of a participant-observer, but more toward the observer end of the continuum (Corsaro, 1985). The researcher did not participate in the direct lecture, but did interact with students and teachers informally during the course of the class and also before and after class.

### Research Questions

The research questions in this project to examine co-teaching involved: (a) What did co-teaching look like in this case, (b) what factors of co-teaching were illustrated in this case, and (c) what can be learned about co-teaching from this case that can add to the pedagogical literature?

**TABLE 1. School and Class Period Demographic Information**

Category	School district	School	Class period A	Class period B
No. of students	17,079.0	866.0	32.0	28.0
Special education students (%)	18.8	20.0	31.3	39.3
Ethnicity (%)				
Caucasian	37.2	43.1	40.0	36.6
Black	41.5	32.2	40.0	53.8
Hispanic	15.2	17.2	10.0	9.7
Asian	4.9	5.2	10.0	0.0
Native American	1.2	2.4	0.0	0.0
Multiracial or other	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

### Data Collection

Classroom observations and informal teacher interviews were the primary means of data collection I used to understand teachers' understanding of the co-teaching situation in the two eighth-grade United States history classes. I took field notes across two class periods (5th and 6th hours) two to three times a week for a total of 9 weeks. The field notes, along with the other data-collection tools (such as interviews), focused on the perceptions of the teachers as opposed to the researcher. In terms of interviewing, I relied primarily on informal or conversational interviews with both teachers, either jointly or individually at the end of the day.

### Data Analysis

The data were organized chronologically, and I developed pertinent themes relevant to the research questions by using inductive data analysis. I began the analysis by reading the entire data set and jotting down themes from the field notes and researcher reflections. This process was repeated several times, both condensing (narrowing the categories) and expanding. After I created categories, I organized the data by event, as determined by the coding. Next I located key and typical analytical vignettes or both within the data to support assertions.

### Results

Co-teaching by the two teachers in this case was more than just a term from a textbook that was enacted in practice.

Co-teaching was a highly complex relationship in which the teachers had to negotiate their roles. The teachers had to construct their co-teaching relationship through the spaces they occupied as well to address the inherent tensions they experienced in this service delivery option. Thus, for these teachers, co-teaching was an entity that they created as they planned together and tried to enact the best model they could in the moment-to-moment situations that developed in the classroom.

### Role-Playing

The teachers assumed many roles within their co-teaching relationship in the classroom (see Table 2 for roles and their translation into practice).

### Spaces: To Share or Divide?

Spaces in this project refer to both physical space (i.e., the classroom) and spaces constructed through discourse or through one's position in a situation or activity. Hence, the term spaces in this case encompassed three spaces: the physical space, such as the classroom, the instructional space, and then the management or discipline space. The teachers both shared and divided the spaces (see Table 3).

### Tensions

Co-teaching, as constructed by these two teachers, created tensions. These tensions could be seen as opportunities as well as constraints when considering what co-

**TABLE 2. Teacher Roles Transplanted Into Practice**

Role	Translation into practice
Instructor to large class	Provide instruction to whole class (e.g., give directions, present content).
Instructor to individuals	Provide instruction to individual students within the same classroom (e.g., restate instructions, read directions or texts).
Disciplinarian to large class	Provide discipline to the entire class (discuss behavior challenges of whole class to all students).
Disciplinarian to individuals	Provide discipline to individuals (discuss privately or publicly behavior challenges with individual students).
Classroom manager	Handle management activities of the classroom (e.g., grades, attendance).
Supporter	Provide support to other teachers professionally and personally.
Gatekeeper or authority	Monitor students during entry and exit in the classroom, including bathroom privileges.
Confidant or friend	Provide friendship and confidence to students regarding their personal issues.

**TABLE 3. Teachers' Shared and Divided Spaces**

Space	Description	How shared	How divided
Physical	It was a moderately sized classroom with 32 student desks arranged in rows as well as a teacher's desk.	Both teachers used the general education teacher's desk and the physical classroom.	Teacher provided instruction to individuals (more one-on-one instruction with students). Teacher divided the room (in terms of physical placement) to maximize student-teacher ratio for behavior management.
Instruction	Teacher led group instruction in the class for all students.	Teachers took turns leading instruction at the same time.	Teacher divided instructional responsibility (making assignments, presenting content). Teacher provided individual instruction to students.
Management and discipline	Teacher addressed the classroom management or students' behavioral challenges.	Both teachers addressed discipline with both general education and special education students. Both teachers had the same philosophy of classroom management and expectations of behavior.	Not one teacher handled the discipline with all students or groups of students, but the special education teacher was more likely to handle discipline of special education students.

teaching afforded both teachers individually and as a collective entity (see table in Appendix). The construction of co-teaching in this case afforded the teachers opportunities such as new freedom, new role opportunities, and support. However, the construction of co-teaching was a double-edged sword; each affordance also created constraints on one or both of the teachers. Hence, co-teaching created or enabled freedom as well as constrained teachers' autonomy; offered support but also devalued others' roles or resulted in feelings of being devalued; and offered new role opportunities while it supported or constrained existing roles.

### Discussion

#### *Conclusions and Implications*

The findings of this study supported much of the literature on successful co-teaching classrooms. However, this study also extended the literature to focus on the different roles available to both teachers, the spaces that needed to be shared and divided, as well as both affordances and constraints this service option provided. The teachers in this case had many experiences in common that previous researchers suggested are beneficial for co-teaching situations. For one, both teachers volunteered to teach together. They had chosen to co-teach together, although it was not mandated by the school, because they felt they had similar philosophies toward learning and behavior management. They both had also experienced previous unpleasant co-teaching relationships with other staff members.

Both teachers shared a common planning time every day. Although they did not always use this time to plan together for their co-taught classes, they did use it at least on a weekly basis to communicate plans for the week and decide who had responsibility for different parts of the lesson. The importance of a common planning time was highlighted during a follow-up visit the next year, in which the teachers had lost their common planning time as a result of school restructuring and budgetary constraints. The special education teacher commented on taking a less active role and being unfamiliar with the lesson plans for the week at the present time. She remarked on how the students, as well as she herself, saw her in more of an aide role, and less as that of an equal teacher since the co-teaching ended.

In addition to supporting the conclusions in previous literature on co-teaching, this case revealed implications for practice. Teachers need to think about the different roles in the classroom. However they should not simply consider how they are going to play all of those roles (see Table 3), but should also determine how their role choices affect that of their co-teaching partner. This case illuminated eight different roles available within a classroom by either teacher. Thus, co-teaching partners need to evaluate and discuss with each other how they can work together to jointly fill all the roles in the classroom. Given the multiple roles teachers need to play in today's classrooms, co-teaching can create situations in which teachers can potentially assume fewer roles in general or moment to moment because they know their partner can take on the others, thus becoming better in the roles they do play.

In addition to considering and discussing the sharing and dividing of roles within the co-taught classroom, teachers also need to discuss the spaces present in this service delivery option. Teachers, like the ones in the present study, need to consider how they can both share and divide the physical, instructional, and management and discipline spaces that exist within classes. The sharing and dividing of those three spaces is important to making both the relationship and the co-taught classroom work. General education and special education teachers need to share the physical space of the classroom they are working in as well as learn to negotiate how to position themselves to divide the physical space in a manner that is beneficial to the largest number of students both instructionally and in terms of classroom and behavior management.

Both teachers also need to be open to sharing instruction with the large group as well as with individual students. The precedent cannot be that general education teachers primarily assume the large-group instructional space and special education teachers are left to fill the role and space of instruction to individual students. Finally, general education and special education teachers need to work together and to communicate concerning the sharing of the responsibility of addressing classroom and behavior management as well as dividing this space to prevent disruptions to the lesson.

Last, teachers need to be aware of the tensions co-teaching can create and consider the constraints as well as the affordances before they enter into a co-teaching relationship. Both general and special education teachers should be aware and discuss with each other that entry into a co-teaching relationship has the potential to create freedom, offer new role opportunities, and offer support, but may also constrain one's autonomy, constrain one's existing roles, and devalue another's role or make them feel devalued. Co-teaching partners must evaluate how to minimize the devaluing of each other, and how to enable each other so that the other teacher can assume new roles, as opposed to being regulated to what one's education title (i.e., general education vs. special education) typically assigns. Co-teaching requires that both teachers be open to conversations on how to use the service delivery option to create instructional and classroom freedom. Therefore, teachers must embrace difficult conversations about grading, student participation, principles of behavior and classroom management, and accommodations before embarking on the relationship.

## Limitations and Future Research

There were limitations within this case. One obvious limitation was that this was a study of two teachers who were engaged in one co-teaching relationship. However, I believe that the study of these two teachers illuminates a positive co-teaching situation, provides support of previous results, and extends the discussion of what occurs in co-teaching classrooms. Another limitation was that the observations were not completed over the course of a school year but began mid-school year.

Future researchers should continue to examine co-teaching relationships, particularly with respect to the potential of co-teaching relationships to improve student outcomes. Research should be undertaken to clarify the relationship between co-teaching classrooms and improvements in student outcomes. Demonstrations of student academic success in co-teaching classes will likely offer support for the use of this service delivery option for students with disabilities. Researchers need to continue to understand how this relationship plays out in classrooms, across grade levels and content areas. If future researchers obtain similar findings in other classrooms, one can then begin to discuss universal aspects of co-teaching relationships.

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**APPENDIX  
Teachers' Opportunities and Constraints**

Opportunities

Created freedom	Offered new role opportunities	Offered support
<p>Created instructional freedom If one teacher absent, lesson continued with minimal interruption</p> <p>Created personal freedom Teachers able to leave classroom to run school errands or address personal education business because another adult present</p>	<p>Teachers afforded time to perform more and multiple roles within the classroom.</p> <p>Special education teacher provided more large group instruction; general teacher provided more one-on-one instruction.</p>	<p>Professional support assistance or support during instruction and behavioral situations are provided.</p> <p>Teachers able to support each other over challenging student situations reassuring, encouraging</p> <p>Teachers could support each other with personal or private situations.</p>

Constraints

Constrained teachers' autonomy	Supported or constrained existing roles	Devalued others' roles or made others feel devalued
<p>Teachers used to managing own classrooms in own way.</p> <p>Decisions need to be made jointly, so each teacher needed to compromise.</p> <p>Required teachers to accomodate themselves to different instructional or discipline techniques.</p>	<p>Primary assigned role or students' or colleagues' associations of teachers' roles are not removed.</p> <p>Special education teacher associated with serving special education students, accomodating, and individualizing; general education teacher associated with being in charge of the classroom</p>	<p>Devalued a teacher's individual roles; at times minimized individual contributions or autonomy</p>

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