



The Odd Couples: Interdisciplinary Team Teaching

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I. THE FOCUS PROGRAM

In 1993, the University of Vermont was looking for ways to improve first-year students' academic experience. In my role as director of UVM's Living and Learning Center, I (Char) worked with the College of Arts and Sciences to create the FOCUS program (Focus On Creating Undergraduate Success) in order to offer students some specific types of experiences in their first year: (1) I wanted them to have at least one small class and to have that teacher be their academic advisor; (2) I wanted them to understand the nature of disciplinary perspectives, so courses are interdisciplinary and team-taught (two faculty members, thirty students); (3) I wanted them to be actively engaged in processes of writing, reading, and speaking; and (4) I wanted students to live together and work on collaborative projects so they would make more connections between their in-class and out-of class lives.

As for the faculty teaching the FOCUS classes, I thought that they'd simply be doing what they already knew how to do well: teaching from their discipline's perspective. They'd have a chance to teach the course of their dreams--on a topic of their own choosing, to a small group of students. And they would be stimulated by learning another discipline's approach to their subject matter.

In fact, faculty did respond in the ways I expected. During the summer, as they chose texts and designed syllabi and assignments, they were excited and enthusiastic about the richness of their course materials; they could hardly wait for the students to arrive. But when fall came, with it came some surprises for both the faculty and me.

I soon discovered that while faculty did expect their teaching partner to approach the subject matter from a different disciplinary perspective, they did not expect that partner to approach teaching the subject matter differently. But differences in assumptions about teaching con-

tinually emerged in each team: over how to run the classroom, over the relative importance of “content” and “process,” over how to approach texts, over teaching the writing process, over how to respond to students, over evaluation.

In the following two stories, we see the differing assumptions teachers from various disciplines bring to their teaching, the ensuing surprises and tensions that emerge when they try to team-teach, how these tensions shape students’ experiences of the classroom, and how, when openly discussed, these tensions can lead to increased awareness of one’s own way of being a teacher and increased respect for other ways.

II. FOCUS: RIVERS

Jack is a geologist at UVM and Jean directs the Writing Center. We were both excited about teaching a year-long course on rivers, imagining (respectively) canoe trips on local rivers on beautiful fall afternoons and animated class discussions of *A River Runs Through It*, the novel vs. the movie. We planned these activities for our class and more: we’d read McPhee and Abbey and Twain; we’d go to the local outfitters to try fly casting (the better to read *A River Runs Through It*); we’d plant trees and shrubs along a stream as a community service project and as a way to learn about the value of streamside buffer zones.

For both of us, writing was central to the course, and we wanted students to write both scientific research papers and essays on literature. Because we each served as academic advisor for half of the students, we planned to each read all the writing of our own students. But compatible as we were when outlining our syllabus, when we began teaching writing we were surprised to find that our purposes, assumptions, and pedagogies were often at odds.

What’s Our Overall Purpose?

Jack: I come from a “content”-oriented discipline. Because Rivers was receiving science distribution credit, I felt an obligation to depth of inquiry if not to breadth. My concept of “process” was the scientific process of investigation or perhaps geological processes which could be discussed on a theoretical basis or examined during field studies. Given the competing demands on class time, I often felt lecturing was the most efficient way to deliver information students needed to know, information that would be combined with the data they’d collected on field trips and the outside reading they’d done to produce their scientific papers.

Besides, I’m personally less comfortable in a discussion format than in a lecture format--I’m there, after all, not just as a facilitator but as an expert. Given limited time and specific topics to cover, I feel that

sometimes lecturing is the best way to get from point A to point B and provide some commonality of information and basic principles upon which to build the scientific paper. Clearly, my attitude is reflective of my own education and past experience in the classroom.

Jean: My discipline emphasizes process, so I'm more concerned that students learn to *do* certain things than that they master a body of knowledge. I want students to learn to use language to explore ideas for themselves and to communicate with others, and so I think they need to be sitting in a circle or in small groups actively using language for at least a part of every class. I want them to become better readers of the texts we assign, the texts they write, and the texts their fellow students write. To accomplish this, we need to discuss our reading in class, discuss their developing papers in conference, and share papers in small group workshops. For me, assigning a text such as *Life On the Mississippi*, which does say a lot about river processes, is still a means to an end, that end being to help students learn to read carefully, to use evidence from the text to support their interpretation, to do the critical thinking that will enable them to construct a compelling argument in their essays.

I think of myself as a facilitator rather than an expert. I plan activities, pose questions, listen, guide, encourage—but generally don't take center stage.

Jack wants to invite a professor from Art History and another from the Music Department to lecture for a week each on the theme of rivers in their respective disciplines. Jean doesn't think students can easily integrate such lecture material into their thinking about rivers and vetoes the idea, but is delighted when, for final presentations, two students do a slide presentation on rivers in art and two others play music featuring rivers to end the class.

In the spring we do a unit on Thoreau, preparing for a (volunteers only) canoe trip on the Penobscot. After much Jean-led journal-writing and discussion, Jack invites an American literature specialist to lecture on Thoreau. The lecture brings all that has preceded it together beautifully, and students are delighted to have an opportunity to take notes.

What Will The Papers Look Like?

Jack: One of the decisions we made (rightly or wrongly) was that our writing assignments would be disciplinary rather than interdiscipli-

nary. This was in part so that students would be exposed to a variety of writing styles. Thus, their scientific assignment was to write a research paper in which they integrated field measurements, studies of the scientific literature, and lecture notes. The format was fairly tightly constrained and there certainly was a specific content expectation. I knew what data were available from our field studies, and what principles and processes had been presented and discussed in class. In fact, I had even identified the three major topics upon which to focus their data analysis and discussion. I expected students to report, interpret, and discuss the data. The structure of the paper was well-defined: abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion, conclusions, and bibliography. The emphasis in writing this paper was on clarity of presentation and thoroughness of analysis. Although any writing process can be thought of as “creative,” clearly this paper was content-focused. Creativity and personal involvement were expected in the quality of the discussion and the integration of our data with basic principles and data from the literature.

Jean: While I understood that the scientific papers would be alike in format, I expected the literature papers to look very different from one another. After all, students interpret *A River Runs Through It* differently, since they bring their own individual experiences to it. And their interpretations will be supported by different evidence. So although Jack gets concerned if students’ introductions sound a little too similar, I actually encourage students to get ideas from one another—I think that’s what happens in any worthwhile discussion. I hope that after seeing the movie version of *A River Runs Through It*, they’ll go back to the suites discussing what was missing from the novel and why, what was added to the movie and why. And if any of the ideas they get from such a discussion help support the points they make in their essays, I hope they’ll use them. What they’ll be judged on is how *well* they use them.

Jean gets a science research paper entitled “Scruffy the Tugboat Does the Lamoille” [the site of our data-gathering field trip], set up in chapters that narrate Scruffy’s adventures. Has she sent the wrong message to her students about the science paper or has this student made some assumptions about writing papers for an English professor?

In another class with Jean, one of the star science students writes a poetry paper in which, in the second paragraph, she lists all the poetic devices she can find because “first you summarize the data and then you interpret it.” Maybe disciplinary conventions aren’t as obvious as we think.

How Much Revision?

Jack: For the scientific paper, clear, concise writing was expected, but there was also a very definite content expectation. I read the papers for what was missing. Discussions with students on early drafts (in one-on-one conferences) reflected this, making it clear where the paper should go and how to get there. A significant part of my efforts in the revision process were directed toward discussing clarity of argument, methods for including the work of others in discussions, how to write an abstract, appropriate voice in a scientific paper, etc. For many students this was clearly a whole new experience, far different from either the essays or science lab reports they had written in high school.

Jack: Now I'm not raising your grade if all you do is make the grammatical corrections I marked. That's not revising.

Student: But you marked everything. What else is there to do?

Jack: Think about expanding the substance where I've indicated.

With regard to how much revision to allow, I felt that it was important to define the writing process, that is, the sequence of drafts, but that at some predetermined point the assignment was done, given a final grade, and we moved on. I had no problem bringing closure to an assignment midway through the semester so long as there had been appropriate opportunity for revision and discussion.

Jean: When I have conferences with students, which I too like to do after they've written a first draft, I ask questions about that draft, trying to better understand their intentions or the problems they're having, and then to help the student articulate plans for revision. I try not to impose my own notion of where the draft is headed or should be headed: I want students to think of themselves as writers, and writers make their own decisions. I like students to be able to return to a piece all semester. This allows them to set the piece aside and get some distance from it, so that they can view it with fresh eyes when revising for final portfolio.

Jack: I think we have a problem.

Jean: What's that?

Jack: Alice tells me you said her roommate could revise her essay on Cadillac Desert for final portfolio. Didn't we agree that essay was finished? Now we're going to have to

let everyone revise. And how do we teach students to adhere to deadlines?

How Do We Grade Students?

Jack: I'm far more willing than Jean to assign grades to first drafts as an indication of my level of expectation and as an incentive for students to take the first drafts seriously. Obviously I think that grades have to be heavily weighted toward the final product, but interim grades can be constructive rather than punitive. At the end of the semester, I'm used to grading mathematically. All of the important activities in the class are assigned a certain percentage of the grade (as clearly indicated on the syllabus), and when final grades are calculated, students can see where their grades come from. All drafts of papers are collected in a final portfolio so that student and teacher can see what work has been done. In this sense I am more focused on grading the products of the semester than the processes involved.

Jean: For me, grading a first draft means that it's "done" in some important sense, so that all students do from then on is tinker. A low grade discourages them and a high grade makes them too complacent, so that they're not apt to cast a critical eye over the piece. Unlike Jack, I'm used to grading holistically, assigning a midterm estimate to a works-in-progress portfolio and then one overall grade for the final portfolio. For me portfolios are more than a collection of the student's past work. They need to include revisions of selected pieces and some reflection on the self as writer. Like Jack, I grade the portfolio as a final product, but if the student hasn't gone through the process—hasn't revised, hasn't offered responses to other writers, hasn't been present for class activities--his or her grade will suffer.

Jean: How do I do these grades?

Jack: Assign a certain number of points to each grade--you know, $A+=13$, $A=12$, $A-=11$. Then multiply the points by the percent of the overall grade that that paper gets. Add all those numbers up and you'll have the grade.

Jean: But what if that's not the grade the student deserves?

Jack: What do you mean by "deserves"?

Jean: Jack, I just totaled up all my grades using that formula you gave me. I think I did the math right, but I got all B's but one.

Jack: So did I.

Jean: How did that happen?

Jack: *Remember when we were grading those debate teams and we gave them all some kind of B? It leveled everything out.*

Jean: *What can we do?*

Jack: *Nothing, except redesign our distribution of grades or assign individual grades in group projects next time.*

So What Happened?

Our Rivers class as a whole was as much fun to teach as we had expected and students liked it: the evaluations were positive and we lost only one student from first semester to second. But even at the time we were not totally happy with our students' writing. Jack didn't think some of the science papers were up to snuff, and Jean thought the portfolios revealed little new thinking. To understand why required the close analysis involved in preparing a talk for the Third National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference and later writing this piece. Our analysis revealed that our teaching of writing had been inconsistent and confusing. The good writers did well in spite of us, but those who needed to learn a process for writing a scientific research paper or needed to learn to read an Abbey essay carefully enough to describe and account for tone did not get enough guidance from us.

Fortunately, we get to try again, as we'll be teaching Rivers next year, and we do have some ideas. We plan to use fewer texts, so that we can be more thorough and pay closer attention to process issues. For example, we'll have students write the scientific paper in sections: when we return from our data-gathering field trip, we'll talk about what goes into the methods and results sections of the paper and have students write up those sections, perhaps putting a few on a transparency to discuss. At the end of a lecture, we'll take time to ask where the information presented might fit into the paper. And we'll use writing tutors earlier in the process, so that students can discuss with a peer how they might develop a section or can get help doing spreadsheets. We also want to try writing in a more interdisciplinary genre, such as a nature essay. We'd like students to try combining close description in the field with personal response and attention to style. We'll read from a collection of essays such as Kathleen Dean Moore's *Riverwalking*, so that for this unit students are reading and writing in the same genre.

Still, a critical issue in a course such as this is the integration of content and process and providing adequate class time and instruction in both. Jack remains concerned with standards, with receiving a student's best first draft effort, with finishing one paper before going on to the

next. Jean remains committed to teaching students to think of themselves and for themselves as writers, having them decide what to revise and why instead of letting a grade decide for them, and letting them work on revision all semester. Like Felix and Oscar in *The Odd Couple*, we seem to have entire personalities, not to mention disciplines and histories, tied up in these stances. In such a situation, we have to ask ourselves what team teaching really means. To us, it means identifying what is absolutely essential and non-negotiable to us as individuals and then developing a framework to accomplish those goals while taking advantage of our differences.

III. FOCUS: WORKING

Shirley and Sue developed a FOCUS course on the experience of working in America in the twentieth century, from the perspectives of labor economics, social theory, and literature. We were both extremely excited about the course content, and spent the summer choosing texts, designing a syllabus, and writing the assignments. We didn't consider that team teaching would be problematic; we each had fifteen years of university teaching experience and had each received university awards recognizing teaching effectiveness.

The Players

Shirley: I'm used to teaching economics to first year students, in a large lecture format, with a difficult textbook. I see my role as a teacher to make the content accessible to students. I try to weave a web, drawing students into the discipline through the lectures, pointing out how one part connects to the whole. I'm conscious of my own persona: a teaching persona that is engaging, entertaining, that tries to draw students into the discipline and toward me, and yet is also self-mocking as I work to get students to see me as a person and approach me. I'm in the current of power, trying to get my students to plug into and become energized by the same source.

While I work at being approachable, I also cultivate myself as an expert. Behind this expert persona is the belief that knowledge is power; that power is to be learned and used; that we all are part of a larger structure and that knowing our relationship to that structure empowers us to move. Part of my goal is helping students locate themselves and achieve power within that structure.

Sue: I teach writing courses. In these courses, process is at the center. There is no specific body of knowledge that I feel responsible for teaching my students. Rather, the content that they choose to write about

in their papers and the readings in the course are vehicles for examining and becoming better at processes of reading, writing, and thinking. While Shirley feels obligated to cover certain “content” so that her students will be ready to take the next course in a sequence, I feel obligated to help each student develop processes for writing and thinking that he or she can draw upon in subsequent courses.

In order to do this, I have developed the persona of a facilitator. I deliberately want to shift students away from focusing on what I want, which never leads to good writing, to focusing on the meaning they’re trying to create. Furthermore, like many members of my discipline, I see myself as teaching students above all to think critically, which means to question what the academy represents and their connection to it, rather than seeing myself as showing them the way to achieve power within it.

Scene One, The First Day Of Class: Differing Classroom Personae

Sue: On the very first day, before we even had any “content” to talk about, I knew I was in trouble. In welcoming the students, Shirley presented the course as a way to gain quicker entrance into the academic community. Unlike other introductory economics courses, our course, she promised, would introduce students to key ideas in the social sciences, enabling them to go in and talk confidently with professors in the social sciences. Furthermore, students should let us know if they had any trouble getting into classes, because we were advisors who “knew people” and could make phone calls.

This left me speechless. I could tell that students were attracted to the strength of Shirley’s personality and the promise of power. And I felt them turn their gaze to me, to see what I had to offer. From this perspective, I felt myself shrink into something pale and powerless. Within the hierarchical classroom that had been created, I felt unable to shift the energy to the students and to play the facilitative role that gave me power. Furthermore, I hated the underlying suggestion that this course was about achieving power—that what we knew gave us power, and that by sharing what we knew with our students, we were going to give them power. I didn’t want to be in the role of making students like—and then become like—me.

Scene Two, Class Discussion: Differing Priorities

Shirley: In our second class, we discussed an article from *Business Week* on “The New World of Work.” We divided the class up into groups and gave each group a different question. To the question “What’s causing the world of work to change?” a group responded “technology.” I

jumped in and began talking about how technology was indeed changing the world of work. I pointed out how computers enable check-out clerks to also perform inventory analysis. Then we talked about how this cuts out the need for additional middle management.

Sue: As Shirley was going on and on, I grew more and more impatient. The article did not say that technology was responsible for the changes. It clearly stated that global competition was responsible, while technology was the instrument that allowed change to occur. I finally stopped the class and asked them to find the place in the article that presents technology as the cause.

Shirley: I couldn't understand why Sue kept wanting to let the text lead the discussion. I felt she was really nit-picking and slowing us down. For me, it didn't matter what exactly the *Business Week* article said—I saw the article as a springboard for more discussion. I didn't see myself as bound by the article as the only source of information for this topic. Indeed, I couldn't imagine having the text be the only source of information. As “the expert” on this topic, I had stuff to say. I wanted students to see how exciting it was to know they could read *Business Week* and talk to a real economist about it.

Sue: But I didn't see the text as leading the discussion. I saw our underlying purpose as helping students become better readers. Their answers told me that they hadn't read carefully or understood the ideas presented in the text. It would have been fine with me if Shirley added more to the discussion once the ideas in the text had been accurately represented, but I wasn't willing to let the students' misreading go. I thought Shirley, in her own enthusiasm about the topic, was forgetting why we were here.

Scene Three, Preparing A Class: Differing Approaches To Texts

These different approaches to working with texts continually left us befuddled. Both of us intuitively knew that *Atlas Shrugged* fit in perfectly with our course. But we each were shocked at what the other wanted to do to prepare to teach *Atlas Shrugged*.

Shirley: I saw the text as a way to introduce an ideology. The text was a vehicle to the ideas that Rand held. The only way to really get a grasp of the ideology was to have background information about Rand and to place her variant of objectivism in the context of other ideologies. Reflexively, I headed to the library to look up what others said about Rand and her philosophy and began to prepare a lecture which would construct a web connecting *Atlas Shrugged* to alternative ideologies.

I assumed I did not need to teach students how to read the book. They could construct the meaning, glean the plot, understand the char-

acters. My role was to help them make a connection between the meaning of the book and the rest of the world. My approach focused on the dialectic of how the study of a text can become a passport to the world. My role as a teacher was to help engage and draw students into my dialogue.

Sue: I've worked enough with first-year students to not assume that they would come to class having constructed an interpretation of *Atlas Shrugged*. And I didn't want to confirm a passive view of reading by having them come to class to be "told" what the novel meant or sent to the library to "look up" what it meant. I wanted them to learn that reading involves interacting with a text to construct meaning. Furthermore, I felt that students would actually get a richer understanding of Rand's ideology by looking closely at the complexities of the novel and constructing that ideology for themselves rather than by being told what that ideology is. (After all, Ayn Rand chose to write a novel rather than a treatise to embody her philosophy.) Then students would be prepared to see Rand's text in a dialogue with the other texts in the course.

Scene Four, What Happens When Students Haven't Done The Work?: Differing Responses To Students

Our different priorities and approaches to texts led us to respond to class situations quite differently. A time when these differences emerged dramatically was in the class discussion of Reinhold Bendix's *Work and Authority in Industry*, for which we had separated the class into two sections.

Shirley: In my section it became apparent that the students were not prepared. I knew that this was a difficult reading, but was excited to discuss it because Bendix was able to put together brilliantly a number of themes that we as a class had discussed over the past several months. This was the capstone of the course. Everything was coming together with this reading. Students would see the new paradigm that was implicit in the course; my "web" was being revealed through this reading—and they missed it!

My impression was that the students had not tried to struggle with the text but had given up, hoping that others in the class would carry them that day. I was disappointed and angry at the class. For me, part of learning how to acquire and use knowledge as power is by learning responsibility—to come prepared or to let me know that you are having difficulty understanding and to ask for discussion. Underlying this is a responsible-citizen model that I hold. That they came unprepared and stated that the reading was boring, as though that was sufficient excuse, made me furious, and I showed that in class by dismissing them.

Sue: In my section, it was also clear that the students didn't understand Bendix and didn't enjoy the text. My response was not to be angry, but rather to assume that something had made this text especially difficult for the students, and to try to figure out what that was. In our discussion, I discovered that the many different voices in the chapter were confusing the students. They thought all of the ideas were Bendix's and couldn't distinguish the different points of view he presented or what points he was trying to make with them. Rather than being upset, I felt the text offered us an opportunity to focus on reading process.

What To Do?

Shirley: I was totally inexperienced in pedagogy, had a teaching style that worked for me, and had hoped Sue would be more dynamic.

Sue: I had my own interpretation of what was happening—pretty much the interpretation we've presented here. I could tell Shirley had no idea of what was going on and why and was responding to the tensions in our class by disengaging, rather than by trying to figure them out. She even suggested we teach our second semester sections separately (taking me completely by surprise). Being a facilitator, I felt if she didn't see what was happening, my telling her wouldn't make her understand. Also, I was conscious that Shirley's interpretation of the tensions, had she attempted to construct one, would be different from my own. I didn't want to impose my interpretation on the situation.

Shirley and Sue: So we never sat down and talked about all of this until we decided to be on a panel about team teaching at the Third National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference. As we explained ourselves to each other, we realized that our differences were not due simply to different personalities but were shaped by our previous teaching experiences and our disciplinary perspectives. Once we understood our different approaches, we appreciated them, and thought incorporating them both into the course would make the students' experience richer. First-year students do benefit from looking closely at processes of reading, writing, and thinking, but they also benefit from being drawn into the larger, exciting world of a discipline.

So how do we work together? Creating the syllabus does not seem difficult—we now want to incorporate both of our approaches, Shirley seeing the need to spend time helping students construct meaning from the texts, and Sue seeing the value of helping students see those texts as part of a larger web. Though this means we'll have to cover fewer texts, we're excited about creating such a syllabus. But how can we both, with our opposing ways of creating energy, operate within the same energy field? How do Shirley, the entertainer and information disseminator, and

Sue, the patient facilitator encouraging students to see for themselves, occupy the same physical space? Perhaps now that we better understand each other, we can better support each other's ways of being in the classroom.

IV. WHAT'S A DIRECTOR TO DO?

The stories of Jack and Jean and Shirley and Sue have made me think more realistically about the implications of team teaching. It occurs to me now that as faculty our experience almost makes us ill-equipped for sharing a classroom. After all, we are used to being totally in control of our classrooms, giving us little to draw on in learning to share that control. We also are used to being successful. Feeling that the tensions of team teaching suggest a failure on our part, we are often unwilling to acknowledge them. Furthermore, our assumptions about teaching and learning often remain tacit, because we're surrounded by people in our own discipline—we don't have a language for explaining and then discussing why we do what we do. And finally, we lead busy lives, and aren't expecting to have to spend time creating a method of team teaching. In fact, in creating the FOCUS Program, we didn't even consider that there was a method of team teaching that differed from what we did as individuals in the classroom.

Can a director do anything to help faculty work out the complexities involved in team teaching? Some help could be provided at introductory workshops. Of course, until faculty actually become involved in team teaching, they may have difficulty conceptualizing the tensions that may emerge, but having faculty like Jack and Jean or Shirley and Sue share their experiences in a workshop setting could provide a starting place. Faculty could then write about and discuss questions such as (1) What persona do I adopt when I step into the classroom and why? (2) How do I usually structure classroom time and why? (3) What assumptions about students and about teaching do I bring to the classroom? (4) How do these assumptions reflect my past teaching experiences? My discipline (or course content)? My personality? (5) How do I integrate writing, reading, and speaking into the classroom? (6) How do I evaluate student work or performance?

Once faculty begin team teaching, I plan to have a few informal dinner meetings, using the stories of Jack and Jean, Shirley and Sue to suggest that resolving the tensions inherent in team teaching requires some open discussion, and hoping to create a safe environment for sharing tensions and problems. In subsequent weeks, we can then take a group problem-solving approach to addressing whatever challenges of team teaching the teams feel ready to address. After all, the potential

rewards are great: new ways of being in the classroom, closer relationships with colleagues, and new insights into what for most of us is central to our identity, our selves as teachers.