

THE W5 OF VIRTUAL TEAM-TEACHING

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OVERVIEW

The principal reasons for virtual team-teaching resemble those for in-person team-teaching: professional development and the enhancement of classroom learning conditions. So how does team-teaching change when you add the information technology component? The connections between the teachers and students are modified by their passage through some form of media. Is virtual team-teaching a worthwhile teaching strategy, and if so, how do we support its use?

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It is Tuesday, two o'clock; Sophie Jacmin is in a Vanier computer lab in west Montreal, and Sharon Coyle is in another computer lab 900 kilometers to the north-east in Sept-Îles. It is early in the term and the students in this Humanities Worldviews course are at their computer stations, thirty-six in Montreal, and fourteen in Sept-Îles. They are working in small groups of eight, sharing individual *PowerPoint* presentations created the previous hour that explain a bit about themselves, their worldview, and the presence of screen time in their everyday lives. They are using Via, a communication platform that allows them to upload and visualize their documents, see and talk to each other, chat, and write their thoughts on a common white board. One student in each group is animating the discussion. This is working very well in two of the groups, and not so well in three others. There are technical problems: Vanier students were asked to purchase headsets with built-in microphones (around 10\$) as part of their course material and some of them do not have theirs with them. In Sept-Îles, the college provides the headsets so students are ready, but some have no one to talk to. Another technical glitch is the animators' inexperience. One Sept-Îles student is self-conscious and refuses to turn on her camera or her microphone and only uses written communication, so her group doesn't get the benefit of the sound and visual components. Two other animators have not given the necessary rights to their group participants so they cannot switch on their headsets. One group is drawing and writing non-content related material on their whiteboard. The teachers in both classrooms are moving from trouble spot to trouble spot solving problems and getting students back on track.

It sounds, and in fact sometimes is a bit chaotic; so why do this? Because when it works, and Sophie and Sharon are getting closer to understanding what it takes to make it work, there are wonderful things going on at many levels of the learning experience. Take the above example; first there is the content, the power that drives every good learning situation. In this case it was an opportunity for the students to reflect on the idea of a personal world view, to come to terms with the concept that they have a specific way of looking at things that differs from the person next to them, and also from a person in a far-away city. One of the goals of the project is to help participants appreciate various regional and cultural perspectives. The title of this shared course is, in fact, "Worldviews of Town and City", and what an eye-opener it is for all involved. On a second level you have an excellent social constructivist activity -create a on a specific concept and share it with a real audience who then discuss and exchange ideas about the information. This active involvement with the content leads to better acquisition and longer retention of

the material covered. And last, but not least there is the information technology element. Students are comfortable in our technological world. This is their playground. Hardware and software that, at times, frustrate us as teachers is second nature to them. They are motivated and comfortable in this mode of operation and we can take advantage of this as educators to share our course content with them while at the same time contributing to their IT leaving profile by making them increasingly confident and competent technology users of a panoply of information technology tools in a wide range of situations.

So let's look at the W5 of Virtual Team-Teaching. Who? What? Where? When? and Why? Who, at the college level, might use this strategy? What exactly is virtual team-teaching, and what do participants need to do to make it work? Where can they integrate this kind of activity into their course content? When is it appropriate; how much time should be given to this kind of interaction? Why use this method; what are the benefits?

VIRTUAL TEAM-TEACHING CHECKLIST

Can we improve the learning environment at the college level? The Sept-Îles /Vanier Project explores virtual team-teaching as an innovative way for students to interact with content. Here is a checklist of things to consider if your colleagues would like to initiate a similar experiment:

- "compatibility of team members
- shared commitment to team-teaching and ongoing communication
- a keen interest in connecting the content or curriculum to real life (...)
- a strong desire to ignite students' thirst for knowledge (...)
- [well-defined] program goals and philosophies (...)
- [well-defined] roles of the teachers and administrators" (11, Groetz)
- "meet regularly
- schedule students' learning activities (...)
- schedule class tests and assessment
- determine which academic and personal skills students need to develop and make a point of addressing these in class (...)
- determine which activities can be best carried out in a large group setting, which in small group settings and implement them
- decide on consistent expectations of students
- discuss problematic students with the team
- discuss educational philosophy with team members
- conduct team meetings with students (...)
- share successful teaching experiences with team members
- participate in a conference as a team (...)
- devise a way of evaluating the team's performance
- devise a program for the induction of new staff members to team-teaching" (9, City University)

1. WHO?

Teachers can come from the same or different disciplines depending on the goal of the project. "Differences in subject expertise, interests, perspectives, backgrounds, and qualification levels, can contribute to the collective strength of a team and the growth of the individual team members. Furthermore, the 'mix' of personalities and characteristics add to the experience the students

get from interacting with the team” (City University 5). Most studies reviewing traditional team-teaching suggest individuals who have similar education philosophies work better as partners while emphasizing the importance of valuing each individual’s specific strengths. For example, one person might be more organized while another is more creative, and each will contribute something important to the team. “Cooperation combined with empathy and the willingness to represent controversial positions, are valuable characteristics of the individual team member” (Shafer 3).

2. WHAT?

What is virtual team-teaching? If traditional team-teaching is “two or more instructors involved in the same course” then we can think of virtual team-teaching as two or more instructors involved in the same course using information technology tools as their mode of communication. In our experience, as well as that of colleagues using similar approaches, at least one real meeting of some of the participants –teachers, students, or administrators–, has an exponential effect on the possible success of the experiment. While the idea of “team-teaching may seem new and experimental, it actually has a long career ranging from the Socratic dialogue to public medieval disputations. There is no more effective method of simulating in the classroom real life conditions of conflicting demands and competing values” (Shafer 1).

SEPT-ÎLES/VANIER PROJECT	
Who:	Funded by Entente Canada-Quebec, also supported by Vanier College and Cegep de Sept-Îles. The teachers involved: Sophie Jacmin and Sharon Coyle. Technological support in the form of equipment and very helpful technicians!
What:	Virtual Team-Teaching, two shared Humanities Courses (345-103-04 Knowledge, and 345-102-03 Worldviews) involving on-line interaction between students and teachers from both colleges using the learning platform <i>DECclic II</i> for schedules, discussion groups, links and mailing, as well as communication platforms <i>Skype</i> and <i>Via</i> for visual and spoken exchanges, and also for the co-authoring of documents <i>Google’s Docs</i> and <i>Spreadsheets</i> , and most importantly the <i>Virtual Window</i> (iChat videoconferencing system).
Where:	Both teachers scheduled a shared time frame (from one to three hours per week) in a computer lab where students had access to individual consoles as well as the large group possibilities presented by the virtual window.
When:	The project began in the fall term of 2006 and ran for four terms. A contingent project has been granted for two terms starting in the fall of 2008 to introduce a mentoring aspect that encourages other teachers from these two colleges to attempt a limited number of virtual team-teaching activities in their courses.
Why:	The project was initiated by administrators from the two colleges who were looking for ways to interact to the benefit of both communities.

3. WHERE?

Where can you find a virtual team-teaching partner? Do you choose someone from the same department, college, or city? And when can you fit virtual team-teaching into your already overloaded

schedule? There are many options for traditional team-teaching, and the same is true for virtual team-teaching. Some possibilities include:

- two or more teachers who share the same time slot teach in different locations and communicate using a variety of platforms (classroom management systems, a virtual window, internet phone systems, etc.);
- “team members meet to share ideas and resources but generally function independently (...);
- certain instructional activities may be planned for the whole team by one individual (...);
- planning is shared, but teachers each teach their (...) own skills area to the whole group;
- teams plan and develop teaching resource materials for a large group of students but may or may not teach them in a classroom situation” (City University 3).

4. WHEN?

When can teachers integrate this kind of activity into their already saturated course content? “A basic premise of team-teaching is that its adoption is not something that happens at one point in time -it extends over time. (...) It seems to take about three years for them to develop the team-teaching process to an efficient and effective level” (City University 3-5). If this is the case for traditional on-site team-teaching, then one can assume there is a similar learning curve in the virtual world. The logical approach would seem to suggest teachers start small; for example, make connections with a possible teaching partner, try to integrate a few specific learning activities throughout one term in one course with one group of students while your teaching partner does the same. Set realistic goals and give yourself adequate planning time and allow for debriefing sessions after each encounter to evaluate what worked and what needs to be modified. We found that the humanities lend themselves particularly well to this kind of exercise as the IT and interpersonal skills mesh seamlessly with the course content.

5. WHY?

Why should teachers try virtual team-teaching? “For Lecturers, who so often work alone, team-teaching provides a supportive environment that overcomes the isolation of working in self-contained (...) classrooms. Being exposed to the subject expertise of colleagues, to open critique, to different styles of planning and organization, as well as methods of class presentation, teachers can develop their approaches to teaching and acquire a greater depth of understanding of the subject matter” (City University 1). For students, as mentioned previously, there are multiple benefits including improved motivation and a higher level of engagement with the material.

Interestingly enough, the second of four experimental terms worked best. What were the conditions that contributed to success? Luck, probably, but there were elements that in hindsight seem to generate a positive influence.

1. Students: both classes had a mix of gregarious, relaxed, exuberant individuals who felt comfortable participating in the project.
2. Small groups: early in the session the two classes were divided into work groups for a project that had a variety of steps and lasted for several weeks. Students came to know each other as individuals and even developed a sense of belonging to their small group.

3. Many of the on-line activities were particularly effective. The technology and the material seemed to work well together.
4. Human connection: that fall Sophie and the Academic Dean from Vanier College, John McMahon, flew to Sept-Îles and spent the day at the Cegep de Sept-Îles. Sharon's students (the same group in fall as in winter -the English Sector is small and offers only one course group of Humanities each term) met Sophie and, with an eye to the upcoming term, interviewed her regarding her worldview. Sophie was frank and funny and students bonded with her in a way that is difficult to achieve "on-line". Then early in the winter term Sharon flew to Montreal for meetings and spent a day at Vanier College. While there she participated in Sophie's Worldviews class. As you can see in the photo, the chemistry is evident in the burst of good humour on our laughing faces.

More by accident than by design, the team had stumbled on an excellent recipe for success.

Our ingredients included the luck of the draw in our lively, willing students who bonded together through small group identification and interpersonal connections. We spiced up the mix with a variety of effective on-line activities, and rendered the confection smooth and powerful through meaningful in-person contact.



It is May, end of term, and the students at Vanier have a guest speaker, Musia Schwartz, a Holocaust survivor who is participating in Vanier's Annual Holocaust Symposium. She is a small, dynamic blond woman of later years, and she is speaking into a hand held cordless microphone. Behind her is a large pull-down screen that shows the Sept-Îles students listening intently from 900 kilometers away. She describes her ten-year-old self being taken to a field outside her village in Hitler's Europe. All the students are captivated. This is living history, world views from the real world. From time to time, students from both classes ask questions and Musia responds. This virtual window between the classes is the most important element of our virtual team-teaching experience. The technology used in this case is a small Macintosh hard drive connected to the teacher's post with a switcher, combined with a user account to give access to *iChat*, a digital video camera on a tripod, cordless microphone, sound system and screen. This "virtual window" is what allows students and teachers to feel almost physically present in the same classroom. We leave it on even when students are working at their individual stations and there is ongoing communication between the teachers. This is the technology that supports shared curriculum, activities, and interpersonal exchanges.



It is the last shared class of the term, we are saying goodbye. The students are expressing their enthusiasm for the project, Sharon and Sophie are joking good naturedly with each other, and the classes are laughing. Dwayne, a tall thin first year student in the front row uses his thumbs and forefingers to form a heart and speaks into the camera ... "I could take this course over and over forever, so -love!"

Why should we use virtual team-teaching as an instruction method? Because it promotes professional development among teachers; virtual team-teaching gives us a vehicle to reflect on our practices and a colleague to discuss shared teaching experiences with, and this provides a marvelous opportunity for

growth. Also, because the use of technology stimulates student motivation; the hands-on interactive project-oriented nature of this teaching strategy provides excellent social constructivist learning scenarios. And lastly, because the inherently social nature of the project touches participants on the affective level, a sometimes nebulous yet vital component of the college learning experience.

WORKS CITED

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SPATZ, N., Photo Credit: Vanier College computer lab showing the virtual window and Musia Schwartz, Winter Term 2007.