

Ep. 052: Adventures in Co-Teaching

Podcast: <https://ProDev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2019/ep052.shtml>

Co-teaching can bring a potent combination of unique expertise and diverse perspectives to a course, affording students to a rich, deep learning environment. Dr. Jen Friberg is the Endowed Cross Chair in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State. She, along with her colleague, Dr. Lisa Vinney, sit down to discuss their journey in creating a truly co-equal collaboration. We discuss how to build trust and confidence in the co-teaching relationship, the importance of communication, and how to avoid missteps. Plus, we look at some of the important questions colleagues must ask each other, and themselves, when trying to determine if co-teaching is right for them.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there, I'm Jim.

LISA: Hi, I'm Lisa.

JEN: I'm Jen.

JIM: Let's talk teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching, a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. Joining me today, two special guests. First, making her first appearance on our podcast, Dr. Lisa Vinny. Hi, Lisa

LISA: Hello.

JIM: How are you?

LISA: Good.

JIM: And joining us again, Dr. Jennifer Friberg. Who is the Endowed Cross Chair in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning here at Illinois State. How are you?

JEN: I'm great, thanks.

JIM: Now you're both here together today because we're doing an episode on a topic that kind of bubbled to the surface here at CTLT a long time ago about co-teaching and you're both also in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. Lisa, you're an Associate Professor?

LISA: Mhm.

JIM: Congratulations.

LISA: Thank you.

JIM: And we wanted to talk today about this concept of co-teaching. So, I'll, you know, whoever wants to go first, what, what, has your experience been like?

JEN: Well, our experience with each other has been really nice.

LISA: It's kind of, it started out more scholarly and then morphed into more of a co-teaching relationship so we can tell you more about that. Absolutely, it built from, you know, being colleagues who worked on a project together to saying, you know, the outcomes of this project would be really interesting and exciting to share with our students and, and so we started offering an independent study each semester for our undergraduates on a topic that they really didn't have a lot of exposure to in their required coursework for our major and it became something we ended up studying and writing papers about in terms of you know research on teaching and learning which is my, my thing here on campus.

JIM: Right.

LISA: And it just sort of evolved from there I think what have, we offered it maybe eight times now?

JEN: Yeah probably I'm trying to think of what year we started maybe 2014 or 2015.

LISA: Mm-hmm yeah sounds about right.

JIM: So, to be clear, I guess when we're talking today in the context of this conversation about co-teaching it's different then I come in and teach a module for the students so-and-so comes in and teaches a module for the students, or, or is it? I'm presuming this is more of kind of a tag-team event for the whole semester, is that?

JEN: Well, I mean, let me give you a comparison.

JIM: Sure.

JEN: There's online teaching, right? And that's done in a lot of different ways. Some people do hybrid teaching where they sometimes see their students and sometimes they don't and some people use a lot of discussion and some people use screencast, and they, you know, so there's lots of different methods or different ways you can go about teaching online. Co-teaching is similar in that if you ask to people who have co-taught before they've probably not done it the same way as another pair or trio of people...

JIM: Okay.

JEN: ...who have co-taught a class and so ideally, it's not what you suggested it's not that Lisa would have half the class and I'd have half the class and we never talk about the content or work together to communicate how that would be structured for the students ideally, it's a team approach from the first week to the last week of the semester where you know we're engaged we don't have to always be with the students at the same time but we know what's happening we've had a hand in helping plan it and definitely you know have a shared vision for the, the whole experience for the students.

JIM: Mm-hmm. So, Lisa we were talking before we started recording today and there is research on this because I had asked if co-teaching was actually like a real word or not.

LISA: Yep it is and it's definitely been explored more at the K through 12 level than it has been at the university level. I think there's more interest in the last few years, but it's still kind of there's, there's not a ton of literature on it.

JIM: Right, right.

JEN: What's interesting about the literature though when you read it is that it focuses more on relationships...

LISA: Mm-hmm

JEN: ...and teacher and student satisfaction with the co-teaching process. Not necessarily with is it a good strategy for students to learn, so that's something that we've been interested in in the work that we've done. You know, is co-teaching something that does help our students? And so, that's again where my office gets involved.

JIM: Now we've kind of defined what it is. Let's talk about how it works and what your experiences are. So, how did you, you mentioned a little bit about there was a desire to accomplish certain things and co-teaching seemed to be a good way to do it. What specifically did you want students to get out of the experience of having more than one instructor?

JEN: So the topic of our independent study has to do with the interdisciplinary management of laryngeal cancer and about five years ago my mom was diagnosed with laryngeal cancer and it's something that speech pathologists, which both of us are speech pathologists, work with pretty routinely and yet my career was focused on small children and they generally don't get laryngeal cancer and so I went across the hall to my colleague Lisa who specializes in voice and voice disorders which is very much in the wheelhouse of what's impacted with laryngeal cancer and sat down and, and, really just went through the, the, situation that my mom found herself in and Lisa was an invaluable resource during that time and out of those conversations evolved a book project actually. I'm talking about the multi-disciplinary nature and, and management of laryngeal cancer. There's nothing like that on the market and so we recruited authors and Co-edited a book together. She was the content specialist, but the book also is focused in on having supplemental materials for families of and patients who have laryngeal cancer and so really our collaboration on this was born of representing both the professional and the family side to a disease that you know has a lot of impacts for patients yes and it's not well covered in voice classes because it's a low incidence disorder.

LISA: It's a, yeah, it's a pretty low incidence disorder compared to some of the other voice problems so it usually maybe it has a class period. So, giving students at the undergraduate level in particular exposure to laryngeal cancer is unusual and a good thing for sure.

JIM: Mm-hmm. So, it sounds to me like there was a threshold that had to be met that it's not just about bringing in a guest speaker for a day or two it has to be something that you both had knowledge and experience and interest that you were bringing from different angles on the same topic and, and, that's really where the co came in co-teaching how did the students react to that because we also talked before we were recording innocent co-teaching is still not a very common thing on our campus. Lisa, what were the student's reactions like? Were they were they a little wiggled out by having more than one professor or was kind of accepted by that point for them?

LISA: I think they were pretty excited about it actually because the format of the independent study is much more discussion based. Now if, if it was more of a lecture-based experience I, I, don't know maybe there would be sort of a different reaction but we start out right away by talking about our individual story and how we both came to this so Jen having this personal experience gets students excited from hearing her perspective and then I talk about my clinical experience and then they're excited about hearing about laryngeal cancer from that perspective.

JEN: It's, it's interesting because you know co-teaching relationships should evolve because each person who is a co-teacher can bring something different to the the students to the interactions and truly buy something different I mean some level of expertise because it's silly to say I'm just going to teach this half of the class and you're going to teach this half, it's no we have different perspectives to represent and our students can do better be as learners and, and, and really understand different perspectives really from an interesting place. I think it's rare in our field that we talk about in depth the, the, patient and family experience. We talk about the disorder you know how to treat it and so I think it was just something that was a different narrative for the students. They had a story they could pin a lot of this on to and, and as we went through the book with the students they'd say, "oh, hey, Dr. Friberg what was your mom's experience with this?" and, and then I could say, "yeah, and then you know in terms of her experience she, she had this and my dad and my sister and I had this," and, and they're able to really get a multi-dimensional view of a disorder in a way that they hadn't really had with some of the others.

LISA: And I think that's one of the things about co-teaching that's very valuable, just, you're giving students multiple perspectives that they wouldn't get otherwise.

JIM: Mm-hm so when came time to actually implementing this independent study this course. You had a syllabus I presume?

LISA: -ish

JIM: What, you say -ish, so how did that work out? I mean, did you, was it co-authored? Was it...

LISA: Yeah, oh...

JIM: Did you just have bits and pieces? What was the process for that?

JEN: We sat down in one of our and we hashed out, okay which chapters in the book are really important to cover and why and which one of us is the true expert in that that area and so we each took the lead with half of the classes but we were we consulted with one another about how we'd set up the actual meetings with the students and the interactions and the, the things that they do when we were all together and we decided to take a particular pedagogical approach with the students we, we do a lot of case studies we're a clinical field but we really wanted the students to do some perspective taking so most of our exchanges with the students we'd meet for about an hour once a week and we'd sit down around a table and the students would take on different roles that were important to the topic of the week. One student might be a physician, one might be the patient, one might be a speech pathologist, one is somebody else and so we'd put a case on the table and they'd have to react from different perspectives and then we change those up throughout the hour that we were together so that they could really see what was happening with and around that patient from a multitude of different perspectives and I think that was really eye-opening for the students first of all that the they might say something different depending on what role they were playing and how they might really see a different viewpoint that otherwise they wouldn't have noted but then fleshed out their understanding of the concept a little bit more and we could watch. You know, it was sort of our role to facilitate that and, and we very much shared the same vision when we were designing this. That we were facilitating and we were going to sit back and let things unfold and then push pause on the discussion if we needed to, to say hey you just said something that was really interesting let's dive into that a little bit more before we get back to the case and we could add more content or answer questions from the readings or refer back to other resources that they might look into that sort of thing.

JIM: So, this is a great example to get to give folks kind of an idea of this because it was an independent study so, did you have a regular meeting time?

LISA: We did.

JIM: You did?

LISA: Yeah, we met once a week for at least half of the semester...

JIM: Right...

LISA: ...so...

JIM: Cool!

LISA: Yeah, so it was it was kind of like a small a small class.

JIM: Yeah like a like an 8 week or seminar class or something like that?

LISA: Exactly.

JIM: And were they undergraduates or graduate students?

LISA: Undergraduates.

JIM: Undergraduate students, cool.

JEN: And the prerequisite was that they had to have taken Lisa's voice disorders class.

LISA: Or they were in it currently. (Jen and Jim): Right.

JEN: So that they had some of the basic anatomy and physiology type knowledge that we didn't feel we needed or had the time I guess I should say to teach as part of this particular experience.

JIM: Cool. Yeah, so as far as the actual procedure I mean we're both in class all the time or did you sometimes you came in and depending on who was leading?

LISA: Yeah, we kind of had a content specialist for each class so we started out the semester with both of us there telling our stories and talking about the impetus for the independent study and the book and then we kind of split off from there where we each took a day or different days from then on.

JIM: So what did you learn from the initial experiment in this co-teaching that you've applied since then? What surprised you along the way? Anything?

JEN: I think what we tried to do together, Lisa and I, is something that is difficult for our students to comprehend. We tried to make it okay for them to take risks and, and take chances and these are students who are high achievers. They have to have a certain grade point average to get into graduate school and they sort of have enculturated this idea that if they take chances they could be wrong and that would reflect poorly on them and so in the context of this we'd say, "okay, you know just say something." You know, "it's okay." There's, there's their grades were not based on being accurate in what they said, it was showing us that they were thinking critically about something and so we just I was surprised by how willing the students were to go along with that and it didn't take long for them to be very interactively asking questions, making comments, challenging each other. Which made it a really dynamic experience, for me at least, and I I didn't expect that.

LISA: Yeah, it was I guess it showed me that you don't need to always be the master of the classroom. We really let the students kind of direct the, the material, the content, the discussion and that made it a richer sort of experience for everybody.

JIM: Well that's interesting because you are kind of breaking up the traditional ideological structure of a traditional class because there is already more than one power holder in that room so that that power is shared and they're seeing that sharing going on if it's being modeled well, so that's very interesting. I haven't I didn't even think of it from that perspective that the students then would, would you kind of break up. You know, this that you mean you were still in control obviously and I'm sure there was still that ideological deference to you. So, when it comes to when it came to doing assessments in the course and what not, how did you handle the grading? Did one person wash and one person dried and put away or out of that how did that work?

JEN: So, the, the, the grades for the course were based on reflective papers that the students wrote weekly. They had a standard set of questions that they were asked to respond to. Things like, what, what are you still confused about this topic? What did you learn today that you'll take with you to other classes or to your professional life? What is in conflict with your perspective or worldview? Because we're talking about life and death kinds of situations and choices people would make under those conditions and so they'd answer these five questions and they'd email them to Lisa or to me depending on who facilitated the class for that day, but then we'd read through those reflections and we'd respond back to the students kind of creating a dialogue. Very long comments to answer some of their questions or respond back to some of the things that they said that were provocative or truly it was obvious that they really felt passionately about. We could respond to that and sometimes I'd shoot a copy of my comments over to Lisa and say, "I think you need to add on to this you're the content specialist."

LISA: And vice versa

JEN: And vice versa, and so our grades were based on the quality of those reflections in terms of showing careful thought, very clearly being... (Jen and Lisa): present

LISA: Yeah.

JEN: in thinking about the topic and, and reflecting carefully on their own learning.

LISA: Yeah, and also, on their participation during the actual periods or class periods so yeah

JIM: Mm-hmm. Reflecting on, on your experiences co-teaching with the mind towards giving advice to someone who may want to collaborate with a colleague and do this themselves in their own discipline; what are some of the potholes on the road that they can avoid? What are some of the things that you experienced that you wish you would have known the first time you did it?

JEN: I think that Lisa and I started out as co-teachers having already a relationship as professional colleagues who had done project work together. JIM: Okay. JEN: And so, I think our experience might be a little different than people who start their professional relationship together co-teaching. So, we already had sort of negotiated a way of communicating and we knew how to you know complement each other and to add on value to what the other could offer and so I was in a very comfortable position with Lisa. I knew I can say, "hey I don't like that idea at all" and be very comfortable hearing that from her in return. So, I think that that leads, I guess to the, the first thing that I think is just critically important in co-teaching is having a really well-established way of communicating that can be open and honest, because it's not an error or it's not even all that curious that the research on co-teaching is about relationships. It's not about the student learning. It's about how do you negotiate power struggles? How do you communicate and collaborate in a way that balances? How do you problem-solve?

JIM: And I can imagine sometimes that those issues come up because of the actions of the students. Lisa, did you ever have an experience where they didn't like the answer from

mom, so they came to other mom? Or anything like that, I'm thinking back to my own upbringing, you know, so.

LISA: It's a great question. I feel like I've had that situation in some other co-teaching relationships I've had, but not in this one because it was very clear what each of us brought to the table. So, if somebody wanted to ask me about something related to the laryngeal anatomy it might make sense to ask me, and if they wanted to ask about like practice patterns that Jen had experienced with her mom they would go to Jen. So, I think it was it was just the vision was very clear from the beginning and that helped with the communication, the clarity for the students too.

JIM: And it was a shorter class so I presume you didn't have as much of the, the procedural questions, like they didn't have a lot of "hey, I can't be here next week and I still get credit" ... er...

LISA: Yeah. I mean you have a little bit of that.

JIM: That's a bad that's a bad example, but, you know, that sort of thing, like "what did I miss?"

JEN: Right.

JIM: My favorite question of all time.

JEN: Did I miss anything?

JIM: Did I miss anything, right, did I miss anything.

LISA: Yes.

JIM: No, I stood here for three hours.

JEN: We actually had a few students not be able to be physically in our sessions who didn't want to miss and they'd Skype in. That's the first time I've ever had that happen. They said, "could we call in? We're going to a wedding, a funeral, there's something we can't be on campus for, but I will block out an hour if I can Skype in."

JIM: That that is an episode in and of itself. (Jen and Lisa): [Laughter]. JIM: That could be. How do you handle that sort of thing? I think that's I think it's interesting.

LISA: Yeah.

JIM: Looking forward, what other things do you think that people who potentially want to be co-instructors should look for? Is there anything in in terms of, so sounds like expertise really plays a role. Is there anything else though in terms of a curriculum or something like that that you, you could imagine would call for co-teaching?

JEN: I think exactly what you just said. I think the curriculum has to call for co-teaching. For co-teaching to to make sense.

JIM: Okay.

JEN: It shouldn't just be done because it's, it's easier for somebody. JIM: Or cool or kind of cool, I mean, it's kind of a cool idea. JEN: Right. I think if you can't justify that each person in a co-teaching relationship brings something valuable to the experience then you're doing something for nothing.

LISA: Yeah, definitely don't do it unless there's a reason to.

JEN: There's a risk to losing your students in the process because if you if you just bring folks in to co-teach for the sake of co-teaching you're injecting issues with two people grading, two people lecturing, having two different kinds of course experiences. The students have to perceive that there's value to those inconveniences to them for them to support the co-teaching relationship, and to, to be willing to be flexible as students within that.

JIM: Mhmm.

LISA: Yeah, I agree with that, yeah.

JIM: And I guess you also have to make an argument to your chair or director of your department to say, "hey, this is important for to be paid to do this," because I mean I mean is there not a perception that it's it's two people, it's costing twice as much to deliver this course and it's kind of a crass view but.

LISA: In the realm of independent studies it's not as much of a...

JIM: Right.

LISA: ...thing because that's extra anyway.

JIM: That's extra anyway, that's true, that's true.

LISA: But, but it's certainly in other courses that are part of our department that are co-taught. There certainly are those struggles, you know, how much credit does this person get versus this person? How much of the percentage of their teaching load is a co-taught class? And, and that's a real issue and barrier to co-teaching at the university level, I think.

JEN: And I think you know, you had acknowledged, had acknowledged, Jim, that we don't do a lot of co-teaching on our campus, yet, but I do think if you look at some of the clinical professions, Dietetics, and Nursing, and Speech, Path and Audiology, and Social Work, and I could keep listing them. If you look at their accreditation standards most-most of them now include some requirement for inter-professional education, recognizing that these are professionals who are going to have to collaborate with other people down the road and so in order to infuse those experiences into our college classrooms I think we're going to find that we'll see more co-teaching on our campus. And so the conversations will have to emerge about, okay, which department is this class offered by? And how does that college or how does that FTE factor in for

folks coming in from outside? So, if they truly want to have inter-professional education it can't be guest speaking. It's got to be, you know, a collaborative experience with a lot of investment by both instructors or all the instructors who are involved.

JIM: So, it sounds like you two had a great relationship so I appreciate you coming in and talking about this today and we should also mention very briefly that you're going to be facilitating a workshop probably the week with this episode airs so it may be too late for people who hear it now but if the workshop is a success we are always happy to invite you back and what not if, so you've had a great relationship, if you're contemplating doing this with someone else, what would you approach that? How would you begin the process? What would you look out for?

LISA: I think it's really important that like Jen said, you start by having some experience working together for you just initiate co-teaching because it is a can of worms that you, you can open up if you just sort of start and you learn all these things about how that other person works, but if you're not aware of that from the beginning then you can't really account for it you don't know if you are actually, going to be able to, to create a good team.

JEN: I think that's a good philosophy or a good statement to work from because I think if you're involved in a research project with someone and your relationship is not fantastic you can still work your way through the project because you want that end result to share with your peers and, and to, to you know, finalize that project, but if you have a bad co-teaching experience then your students can be impacted.

LISA: Oh, yeah.

JEN: And they can be impacted negatively and you know, we're here to do the business of educating our students centrally and certainly we want to do that well.

LISA: Mm-hmm. The other thing that I think is important is just that you sort of have the same kind of philosophy or vision for teaching in general and the course. So, I think that Jen and I both have very similar sort of we're very student-centered, you know, we will make adjustments based on feedback that we get from students but not everybody is going to be like that and so, having a really honest conversation with the person you're considering co-teaching with that's important because if you don't value the same things then your students are going to... they're going to know it.

JIM: Mm-hmm.

JEN: I think planning co-teaching is almost like a negotiation and you, you work through the process of, okay, what could this look like if we decide to do it? What are your priorities? How would you deliver this content? How, how would you have the students, you know, assessed as part of the process? And, and, and, you know, if you through that negotiation find out that gosh Lisa you want a lecture all the time and I want to do interactive case studies all the time many may or may not be the best marriage, but it might be. If we could figure out a way through some good conversation and negotiation to make that a cohesive experience for the students.

LISA: And then one other thing I'll say is just as somebody who's more much more junior than Jen, like, I had some nerves. I hadn't, I had nerves about, you know, being in the same classroom as her and feeling like, 'oh my goodness am I going to be able to be as good at this as her,' so there's these power differentials but, but I had this open relationship with Jen and I have a friendship with Jen so it's, it's a those feelings go away. And then you realize, 'oh I can learn I can learn from her.' I have all these pedagogies that I now can take with me into other classroom environments.

JEN: It's funny you say that because there's a different power differential too because you're the content expert. We're sitting here in front of these students and they're asking questions and I'm deferring to you because I just don't know the answers. I am NOT a specialist in laryngeal cancer and thank God it's not, you know, had I not had the experience with my mom I never would have been, and, and so, you know, it's, it's been a really good give-and-take between that because it wasn't that there was one power differential, we shared that.

LISA: Yeah.

JEN: You know, so there was a balance in, "okay, you're expert here, I'm expert here, and so, we can work with that."

LISA: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

JIM: I think you're both rock stars just listening to you, so.

JEN: Thanks, Jim.

JIM: Lisa, Jen, thank you so much!

LISA and JEN: Thank you.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about our pokey little podcast, go to our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu For Dr. Lisa Vinny, for Dr. Jennifer Friberg, for all my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, until we talk again, happy teaching.