**Some thoughts on team teaching at evergreen**

By Jin Darney, Member of the faculty, Emerita

November, 2010

I. PROLOGUE

I taught on 22 teams at Evergreen in my 32 years, and had uniformly good experiences—with only one exception. I’m trying to think about that experience, and, at the same time, identify the qualities of a good team experience for new and nearly new faculty.

My graduate training was in interdisciplinary studies, and I had observed what passes for team teaching at most Universities: a set of professors moving in and out of a class and a static set of students—more like tag team teaching. Learning to think about American Social History *and* American Women’s History *and* American Literature *and* American Women’s Literature all at the same time and in an integrated way convinced me that the intellectual issues in teaching were questions rather than answers, approaches rather than definitive answers.

When I came to Evergreen, I had taught on one other team, at Pine Manor in Chestnut Hill, MA, with my friend Vera. Just after the birth of my second child, we taught a course on the history of child raising, and Vera was much more familiar with the material than I, particularly the mothers’ manuals from the American Colonial Period. As I was consumed by issues in my growing family, I was grateful for her leadership in the program; I was an important part of the team, however, and feel that I pulled my weight, contributing some reading suggestions, writing assignments, discussion topics, and exam questions. The topic was a rich one, with lots of historical documents, Mothers’ Advice works, fiction, and essays.

We didn’t sit down and talk about team teaching, but we did have many discussions about the nature of the course, and what we wanted students to accomplish. We just assumed, I now realize, that we could easily teach together and make it work. We did.

Vera and I planned together, and were in the classroom together, trading responsibility for discussions, writing assignments, and exams. The partnership was almost effortless, with no hitches or disputes. I learned from her to write provocative exam questions, to listen carefully to what students *meant* rather than to what they were actually saying, and to assign material that we knew was too difficult for the students, knowing that they would rise to the occasion.

The most difficult part for most faculty in team teaching, giving up expertise, was not hard at all for me, as I felt that I had so much to learn from Vera and from the material. The second most difficulty part for faculty, the public nature of teaching in teams, was never an issue, as I learned so much by watching Vera teach, and did not feel that exposing my ignorance demeaned me in any way.

Coming to Evergreen in 1978, I stepped into an established culture of collaborative teaching and learning, and taught on teams until my retirement in 2004. The best teaching experiences were based on a strong team, a provocative “big question,” and a willingness to give up the role of expert and become a co-learner. I taught primarily with other folks in the humanities, but also with an architect, several anthropologists, a nutritionist, a psychologist, a business faculty, and a documentary filmmaker.

I learned about team teaching by doing it, by paying attention to my colleagues’ contributions to the team, and their ways of planning and teaching. I also learned, of course, what *not* to do by watching colleagues. I learned to be the structured team member when teaching with a loosely organized team, and to be the slightly wacky one when teaching with a really organized team. I came to value the chance to be different on each team, to be the hard ass one time, and the softie another, to be the Program Mother sometimes, and to let others do that, as well. I learned to lecture better by watching colleagues, and I learned to be more attentive to students by the same method. I learned to lecture by combining material and facts with questions and musings that I have about the material and the subject. I came to see a lecture as a snapshot of my thinking at the time, rather than a definitive presentation. Along the way, I gained some expertise in Film Studies and the Memoir (enough to teach them alone), in Visual Anthropology, in Statistics, learned to design creative projects in which students could demonstrate understanding, and got much better at helping students with writing and seminar skills.

I was particularly good at taking notes of our planning meetings, summarizing them, and turning them into a record of our decisions, and the tasks to be completed. I easily took on several tasks that my colleagues despised: asking colleagues to guest lecture, writing those thank you notes to those same guest lecturers, organizing field trips, ordering films. In exchange, my colleagues took on other tasks in program planning and teaching: securing classroom space, creating the program budget, supervising the program aides, creating the program web page, etc. I found that my tolerance for ambiguity and indecision in the planning process was greater than many of my colleagues, so that when I was ready to move, to decide, they were relieved.

The best teams focused on student learning and development, as seen through a challenging question or topic: What are the big questions in philosophy? (it turns out there are 4); what’s going on in the Middle East? (this, in 1988) What makes a good community? What is the relationship between Shakespeare’s plays and life of Elizabethan England? What does food teach us about our lives? What is it about Islands? What makes a Museum? What happens when you turn history into fiction? What is Friendship?

I chose my teammates carefully, attending to both their intellectual interests and their pedagogical strengths. I asked around about colleagues with unsavory or questionable reputations, I talked with their former colleagues, I interviewed them, I checked with the student underground reports. But I also taught with several unknown quantities—brand-new faculty, a perennial adjunct faculty, and faculty about whom I knew nothing. All of these were good experiences.

In my Evergreen teaching experience, I had only one difficult experience on a team, and the experience made me think in a more systematic way about the elements of team teaching. As a dean, I had heard horror stories of teams gone wrong, of teams that had to get a divorce, of new faculty intimidated by more senior faculty. But I had not had the experience myself. When as Curriculum Dean I designed *The Real Faculty Handbook*—intended to be actually advice—as opposed to the rather legalistic *Faculty Handbook* that is part of the Washington Administrative Code, I discussed Team Teaching in a section on Program Planning, but it was not particularly expansive. So I’ve been thinking about ways to help new faculty think about being on faculty teams. What follows is the beginning of that thinking.

II. FURTHER THOUGHTS

The *Real Faculty Handbook* (an adjunct to the official *Faculty Handbook*, created with faculty when I was Curriculum Dean in 1997) and *Teaching Practices at Evergreen*, a 2003 update, introduce the topic this way:

Team-teaching is part of the tradition established by the founding faculty. There are at least two ways of creating a team: generating ideas for programs with people you know or approaching people you may not know well or at all with a question, theme or problem you would like to work on.

The size of the college makes it hard to know the entire faculty, so it is important to chat with colleagues in your building, in faculty meetings, at retreats; and to engage in the work of DTFs. The latter will provide you with a collaborative setting that continues over time to solve a problem— much the same function of a faculty team.

Faculty contribution by Don Finkel: Coordinated Studies are designed not to teach subjects per se; they are designed to promote inquiry. They are an ideal teaching mode to help faculty get out from under the impossible burden of adequate coverage—because in a Coordinated Studies program there are, ideally, no subjects to be covered! Rather there is a question to be addressed or a problem to be investigated. Faculty will help students learn to use whatever methods are germane to investigating the problem and whatever background knowledge might be necessary, and this knowledge and these methods may well derive from traditional academic disciplines (though they might well not) but the disciplines are useful only in this way, only as a means to an end, not as subjects-to-be-covered.

What follows are my observations of some of the characteristics of a successful team teaching experience.

* The most important characteristic of a successful team is the respect the team members show each other. This sounds trivial, but it is crucial. You must respect each other as colleagues, and as academics; you must respect their disciplines and learn about them from your teaching partners. You needn’t be fast friends, but you must respect each other, and feel respect from your colleagues. From the beginning of the college, Evergreen faculty chose to go without rank, reflecting the shared nature of the teaching process. The “senior” faculty on the team may have been at the college longer than you have, but they come to the program theme with the same sorts of questions that the newer faculty have, and they don’t “own” the program.
* Begin with a rich, complex question or theme. Set aside questions of coverage until you have explored the questions that you want to think about. The best faculty teams work in areas where they themselves are asking the same questions that they pose to the students. Creating a rich question ensures that your faculty seminar will be equally rich and creative.
* Good topics lend themselves to exploration from wide range of academic disciplines. A program called *Islands*, for example, could be explored through botany, biology, astronomy, ecology, history, anthropology, drawing, photography, film, literature, mythology, economics, depending on the strengths and interests of the faculty. A program called *Water* could explore geology, chemistry, environmental studies, public policy, literature, film, philosophy, and political economy. There is no single way to address the question, so you are not worried about “covering” all that needs to be covered in the program.
* Begin exploring the questions as a prospective faculty team *before* you commit to working together. Think about the question in the largest, most global terms, at least at first. Think about the parts of the question that you don’t understand, or that you resist. Be open and clear with each other about your teaching styles, your interests in the topic, your needs from your teammates. This part of team building is important: spend time talking together about the ideas you have for the program, and don’t rush to form a reading list and syllabus.
* Be prepared to be astonished by your colleagues’ interest in and ideas about the program materials. Be prepared to be delighted with your discussions with them.
* Only after you have explored the topic together, think about what sorts of skills students will need to be able to participate in the exploration—will you need to teach them chemistry? Mathematical analysis? Filmmaking? Web design? Botany? –and think together about ways to help students gain the skills they need. Because you teach those skills in the context of the larger theme or question, they’ll be relevant to students’ learning and much more likely to take hold. Begin to think, also, about ways students will be able to demonstrate their learning of those skills.
* As you begin to explore teaching together, take the time to talk with each other about your strengths and what you can bring to the team. Each program has a bunch of tasks to be divided among the team members (book ordering, ordering films or other media, tracking registration data, room scheduling, creating the final version of the syllabus, preparing workshops or labs, inviting guest lecturers, writing thank-you notes to them.) Be honest—if you hate calling colleagues to ask them to guest lecture, say so, and let a teammate take on that role, and be clear about what you can contribute to the team.
* Be sure that you design the program as a whole: students will see the integrity of the program if all members of the team participate in all aspects of the program. Typically, one of you will assume responsibility for a segment of the program, writing workshops, for example; it is important, however, that you counter the tendency to self-isolate and *not* carry out that segment alone—your colleagues will be reading the essays, after all. If you colleague is presenting material that is quite foreign to you, so much the better: the students will see you learning alongside them. It is also important to participate in any workshops that you ask staff to help you with, in the Computer Lab, for example. You can help them trouble shoot and answer students’ questions and model their learning.
* It is crucial that all members of the team “own” the entire program. Students will try to figure out who designed which part of the program, and each member of the teaching team has particular interest in particular parts, but each of you planned the program as a whole, and you want to make that clear—to each other, to the students.
* One way of owning the program is to plan the structure of seminars each week together. You can do this in a brief meeting before seminar or on email. When everyone is doing more or less the same thing in seminar, the goals you set will be clearer to everyone. Goals can be “finding the thesis statement, weighing the evidence,” or “connecting the themes of this novel to the central question of our program.” [This part is from Susan Fiksdal, Faculty Member Emerita]
* Just as students have diverse ways of learning, faculty have equally diverse ways of teaching. Learn from methods that are alien to you; learn from ways your colleagues go about this fascinating business of teaching and learning.
* The *Faculty Handbook* explains the Faculty Seminar, and Business Meeting requirements for each team. Take these seriously: the faculty seminar is your chance to explore the program ideas with peers. Of course such a discussion helps you prepare for seminars with your seminar group, but that’s not their primary function; it’s your time for intellectual stretching and challenge. Treat the Faculty Seminar time as sacred; come prepared with questions to ask your colleagues, and with observations about the material. Keep the Business Meeting separate—on a different day, ideally. That’s the time to go over syllabus changes, administrative details, and discussions of particular student issues. If you don’t keep them separate, the Business Meeting will bleed into the Faculty Seminar and eventually gobble it up.
* After your discussions planning the program, writing a Faculty Covenant will be easy. The language of the Covenant itself is less important than the discussions that go into its creation. You will see from the sample Covenants [in the deans’ area] that the form and content vary widely. Because it’s important to maintain faculty consistency you’ll need to consider a variety of issues and tasks in your agreement: which faculty will do which tasks? How will you handle student disputes? How will you manage attendance? Will you award partial credit? And if something comes up that you haven’t anticipated (believe me, it will) don’t hesitate to tell the student or whoever that you’ll have to talk with the team about it.
* When the program is up and running, check in as a team at least once a week, to be sure that everything is running smoothly. You might want to eat lunch together, for example, when you’re not doing business, just to chat and check in. Be sure to raise any concerns before they become big issues.
* As you teach together, be sure that you are all on the same page—of the syllabus, your seminar structure, the assignments, of the agreements you have made together. Nothing undermines a team more (or confuses the students more) than one member changing the syllabus or an assignment without notice.
* And if you are on an impossible team? First, of course, talk with your team. Try to make clear the parts of the teamwork that aren’t working for you, to remind your teammates of the commitments you all made at the beginning of your planning and teaching. If that doesn’t resolve things, ask your dean for a mediator to help your team talk together and try to resolve your difficulties. If that doesn’t resolve things, talk with your faculty buddy, with your dean, with other colleagues who have taught with those colleagues. A team that is in conflict impedes student learning in addition to the stress on the teammates. The students know that something is wrong, that the team isn’t working. The very last resort is to “get a divorce.” Working with your dean, your team will decide how to divide things up so that the students are least harmed.

I hesitate to say this for fear of sounding sappy, but team teaching has a lot in common with other intense relationships in which we participate: you need to trust your colleagues, respect them, share a commitment to student learning, and you need to find them interesting and challenging.