“There is no ‘I’ in team” … but there should be

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Abstract

In a global environment where most work is completed in teams, it is inevitable that teaching also follows this route. This, however, only works if the team sets up effective communication networks. When they work well, teaching teams benefit students by providing greater depth of knowledge consistency of messages, more variety in the classroom, and diversity among the team members. But team teaching also poses challenges. It forces lecturers to step outside their comfort zones, and for those who are generally self-sufficient, team teaching can create a perception of losing control of the classroom. Furthermore, team teaching generally involves larger class sizes, which can have a negative impact on the relationships with students. Thus, strategies are needed to ensure that team teaching capitalises on the benefits and minimises potential drawbacks. This paper will begin by defining team teaching, followed by an overview of key advantages and disadvantages of team teaching in the public relations context before proposing strategies to optimise team teaching. It will conclude with introducing the notion of iTeams

Keywords

team teaching; pedagogy; public relations education; student experiences; iTeams
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Introduction

The idea of teaching in teams is not new, and yet it is something that has received relatively little attention in public relations education. A basic electronic library search using the term 'team teaching' showed that the first article on team teaching was published in 1952, and since then 18,673 articles have been published on the subject. Adding the term ‘public relations’ to the search, however, reduced the results to 671, with the first one written in 1959. This demonstrates that although the role of teams in organisations has become increasingly recognised as a vital factor in business success (CTU Training Solutions, n.d.), and teamwork has become a significant aspect of many public relations curricula, team teaching has not received the same attention in public relations literature. Common sense dictates that in order to teach students to work effectively in teams, they need to be exposed to the modelling of teams, and what better way to do this than by demonstrating effective teamwork through team teaching? But, as Gonders and McDermott (2010) pointed out, teaching staff typically do not model teamwork in the classroom.

Drawing on literature for the fields of education and pedagogy as well as from the authors' combined teaching experience of nearly 40 years, this paper will address team teaching in public relations. It will begin by defining team teaching, followed by a brief discussion of key advantages and disadvantages of teaching in teams before proposing strategies to optimise team teaching. Using observations as a tool to reflect on team teaching practices, the paper concludes that to be effective, the team must acknowledge and support the individual team member to ensure diversity in curriculum development and teaching strategies.

Team Teaching Defined

Essentially, team teaching involves two or more staff members who jointly produce a course (Carpenter, Crawford, & Walden, 2007; Crawford & Jenkins, 2015; Jenkins & Crawford, 2016), involving planning, delivery and assessment of a course (Chandra & Scotille, 2005; Conn, 2010; Crawford & Jenkins, 2018; Kerin & Murphy, 2015).

Models of Teamwork

Models of teamwork abound. Nonetheless, they are generally based around four key relationships: curricular unification, teacher-student interaction, student engagement and teacher autonomy (McDaniel, & Colarulli, 1997). Based on teacher autonomy, Gonders and McDermott (2010) proposed four approaches to team teaching, namely the pow-wow approach where ideas for teaching are shared, the Chief-Indians approach where one person takes the lead; the two-for-one approach where teachers partner up in the classroom; and the two-partner controlled chaos approach where teachers work as partners to share the course planning, content and development.

Carpenter et al. (2007), on the other hand, based their view of team teaching on contribution and workload, describing it as a continuum ranging from limited to full participation. Undeniably, though all teams involve the sharing of work to some extent (Booth, Dixon-Brown, & Kohut, 2003), the levels of sharing can vary significantly across various forms of team teaching (Chen & Cheng, 2014) as demonstrated in figure 1.
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Figure 1: The team-teaching continuum

The least involved is teamwork. Teamwork is the most basic form of team teaching and may not even extend to physical teaching. A sole teacher, for example, may have their work moderated by a colleague and hence becomes involved in a basic form of teamwork. Rotational teaching sees different people teach different parts of the course (van Amelsvoort & den Ouden, 2010), allowing each teacher to focus on their areas of expertise. This works well where teachers have different expertise and areas of interest. For example, the authors regularly take turns giving lectures and preparing tutorials on topics of interest. In doing so team members and students alike benefit from sharing of knowledge.

Parallel teaching sees multiple classes run analogous, whereby teachers focus on the same learning outcomes, but may have their own lesson plans to meet those outcomes, or alternatively one person provides the lesson plans, which everyone else follows (Murchú & Conway, 2017). Parallel teaching is a popular form of team teaching because of its apparent cost-effectiveness. However, to be successful this form of team teaching needs to be accompanied by regular meetings and explicit clarification of content. Experience has taught the authors that too often certain shared knowledge is taken for granted, leading to uneven and inconsistent student experiences.

Cooperative teaching intensifies the team experience by having team members work together on lesson plans and teaching strategies (Crawford & Jenkins 2015; 2018), thereby making the experiences almost identical for students across different classes in the same course. The most involved form of teaching is co-teaching, whereby the entire team is in the class at the same time, teaching together. Co-teaching does not need to be costly. Indeed, in contemporary open-plan learning environments it can be quite cost-effective though it may require changing how institutions have traditionally delivered public relations courses.

Communities of practice

Team teaching is similar to the idea of communities of practice or professional learning communities. Communities of practice – a concept introduced by Lave and Wenger in 1991 (Donnison, Edwards, Itter, Martin, & Yager, 2009) – can be defined as groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better (Reaburn & McDonald, 2017, p. 123). The fundamental principle of a community of practice is the domain of knowledge (Donnison et al., 2009), something all teaching teams usually possess. Further support for teaching teams as being communities of practice can be found in Wenger’s three key structural features of communities of practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Mercieca, 2017).

The only difference between a teaching team and a community of practice is that membership of communities practice is voluntary (Mercieca, 2017), which is not
always the case for teaching teams who are often drawn from available teachers who have subject-related knowledge. However, teaching teams will work best when all team members want to be a part of the team, and therefore, wherever practical, team members should be invited rather than appointed. This will enable a teaching team to grow into a community of practice, as they are recommended as a practical way of developing a scholarship of teaching and learning at grassroots level (Mercieca, 2017, p. 23). Indeed, the more teams work together and want to be team members, the more collegial and productive the team environment becomes.

Advantages of Team Teaching

There are numerous advantages to team teaching, such as providing collegial support, enabling professional development, improving student experiences and benefitting the organisation. Each of these will be briefly outlined here.

Collegial Support

Solo teaching can result in what Benjamin (2000) calls ‘pedagogical solitude’. Teaching in teams overcomes this potential isolation (Kaplan, 2012; Plank, 2013; Reaburn & McDonald, 2017) and leads to opportunities to improve one’s teaching. Teamwork provides collegial support in the form of instant feedback, and can offer a supportive environment for team members with opportunities for professional development (Crawford & Jenkins, 2015, 2018). Instant feedback can be provided and sought on individual teaching practice, leading to future improvement. It allows members to learn from each other, both in terms of subject content and delivery. To be effective, however, it requires team members to be open to receiving and giving constructive feedback. Effective communication, as will be discussed later, is therefore important for effective team teaching.

Collegial support allows not only for the sharing of workloads (Benjamin, 2000; Chandra & Sotille, 2005; Conn, 2010) but also provides opportunities for reflection. Reflection is “a systematic approach to helping practitioners in all fields develop higher levels of self-awareness, and to create opportunities for professional growth and quality improvement” (Mules, 2018, p. 174). Teachers must reflect on their own professional practices and do so continuously (Liebel, Burden, & Heldal, 2017); only then can teaching be improved (Kerin & Murphy, 2015). Thus, a team environment assists teachers to recognise their blind spots and modify teaching styles (Chen & Cheng, 2014).

Professional Development

The best way to learn is through experience, and hence the best way to learn about teaching is to observe colleagues in action (Chen & Cheng, 2014; Haddon, 2011; Plank, 2013). Team teaching creates the most natural context within which to observe other teaching styles and to become actively involved in enhancing one’s own teaching. Being observed and receiving constructive feedback is beneficial across all levels of experience. But, initially, observing and being observed can be intimidating. Despite excellent student appraisals, for example, both authors have been self-conscious about being observed. As time passed and confidence grew, however, these feelings transformed. Now, both make the most of the learning opportunities team teaching provides, which includes generating new teaching approaches and engaging students. When such team teaching turns into meaningful
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professional development, it can aid in preventing what Carr (2018) referred to as passion atrophy where teachers become stuck or bored with the way they teach—a common risk for most experienced teachers.

Furthermore, team teaching can lead to research outputs, which are not uncommon outcomes of cooperative teaching, as it can foster innovative opportunities for collaborative research (Meizlish & Anderson, 2018; van Amelsvoort & den Ouden, 2010). In an era of emphasis on research outputs, team teaching can thus be quite beneficial to individual career progression.

Improved Student Experiences

In addition to personal and professional benefits, research has also shown that a team-teaching strategy can be beneficial to students’ learning experiences (Chandra & Sotille, 2005; Crawford & Jenkins, 2018; Hamer & O’Keefe, 2012; Migdadi & Baniabdulrahman, 2016), as one teaching style does not fit all students (Haddon, 2011; Mercieca, 2017). When teams function well, they benefit students by providing greater depth of knowledge (Bradstreet Grinois & Waller, 2010), consistency of messages, more variety in the classroom, and diversity among the team members (Dyrd, 2010; Murchú & Conway, 2017), as well as exposure to different teaching styles (Fuller & Bail, 2011) and a diversity of ideas (Benjamin, 2000; Liebel et al., 2017). One of the authors, for example, has been a member of a co-teaching team for a number of years. This co-teaching team has learned to bounce from one member to another during face-to-face teaching, and to rely on collegial input to enhance the students’ experiences. Members do not see it as a weakness if they pass questions over in front of students to a team member who has more experience or knowledge in a subject area or is able to answer the question more precisely. Not only does this ensure the students get the best answers, but team members develop their own expertise.

Indeed, evidence indicates that students benefit from being exposed to rational debate and discourse during the course of their studies (Carpenter et al., 2007). Contrary to what many educators believe, an undeviating line is not always in the best interest of students. This makes sense when considering that attention to the authenticity of the learning situation as representative of the specific practice is important (Kerin & Murphy, 2015, p. 312). Students will be faced with a variety of conflicting messages throughout their careers. Learning to manage these early on, prepares them better for the complexity of real-world challenges (Meizlish & Anderson, 2018), or, what Schön (1983) refers to as, the messy swamps of professional practice. However, as will be discussed later, students new to the co-teaching model may find it difficult to reconcile the lack of similarity with past experiences, leading to confusion and insecurity in whose opinion to value and whose instruction to follow. Thus, strategies need to be in place to ensure that the learning environment is not compromised.

For public relations teaching, effective and interconnected team teaching actively demonstrates to students how they can succeed in a team-focused environment. The strong collegiality amongst the teaching team creates a sense of family in the classroom, which facilitates students’ learning (Carpenter et al., 2007), making it easier for students to interact with instructors. Research shows that more interaction in the classroom is a direct result of interplay between different teachers (Chandra & Sotille, 2005). How this can be achieved will be discussed in a later section.
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Organisational Benefits

Team teaching does not only benefit teachers and students but can also benefit the educational institution. It future-proofs courses through the transfer of tacit knowledge, for example. Though academics are capable of creating paper trails to create a record of course content, according to Liebel et al. (2017) the only way to guarantee the transfer of tacit knowledge is in a team-teaching environment. By having multiple people teach the same course, everyone becomes familiar with it (Meizlish & Anderson, 2018), and hence the loss of a team member is unlikely to adversely affect the organisation’s ability to continue the offering to students.

In addition, educators are in a position to drive educational renewal (Crawford & Jenkins, 2018), which is essential, considering that subject matter evolves quickly (Hara, 2009). Often changes need to be implemented hastily (Chen & Cheng, 2014), and these changes will be better informed in team teaching as more views are readily available. Hence teams enable the institutions to offer courses that are at the forefront of academic practice.

Challenges in Team Teaching

Regardless of its benefits, team teaching is not without its challenges. While the authors are strong supporters of team teaching, it would be thoughtless not to outline some of its key disadvantages.

Time and Classroom Management

The first major disadvantage of team-teaching is that it is time consuming (Carpenter et al., 2007; Conn, 2010; Crawford & Jenkins, 2015; Plank, 2013). While it is an educational sound approach, the associated costs make it less attractive to institutional administrators. This is particularly the case of the two-for-one approach identified by Gonders and McDermott (2010) where there is an expectation that teachers are compensated fully if both are present at each class. Furthermore, in order to function well, team meetings involving all members must be held regularly. Weekly planning meetings in addition to overall planning meetings at the start of a teaching semester, pre- and post-moderation meetings for every assessment as well as post-evaluation meetings at the end of a course, are all vital. Though these activities constitute good teaching practice, they require time.

A second disadvantage, as discussed by Bradsheet Grinois and Waller (2010), is that team teaching involves giving up sole control in the classroom. Mansell (1974) went as far as to say that team teaching interfered with academic freedom. Although this can certainly be an issue for some teachers, in the authors’ experience, academic freedom has never been a noteworthy problem provided there are strategies in place to preserve team members’ independence, allowing members to draw on their unique strengths.

Resistance to Change

Switching to team teaching requires a change in attitude and approach. As with any change, there may be some resistance (Conn, 2010). For example, there may be resistance to adopting new work practices (Booth et al. 2003) or teaching in front of others (Jenkins & Crawford, 2016) if the co-teaching model is used. There may also be resistance to relinquish some control over subject matter when following another
team member’s lead. Recognising and acknowledging resistance is important. An environment where team members can express these concerns and work through them without fear of reprisal is important. As mentioned before, good communication and collegiality are therefore critical in achieving successful team-teaching.

Student Experience

Another disadvantage relates to the student experience. Despite students believing they learn more in a team-teaching environment (Liebe et al., 2017) and all the benefits outlined in an earlier subsection, there are a few points to bear in mind. Team teaching generally means larger class sizes to compensate for higher costs involved in co-teaching. This results in greater difficulties to get to know individual students (Chandra & Sotille, 2005) and scheduling in-class presentations (Booth et al., 2003), for example.

In addition, some students see large classes as an opportunity to participate less (Booth et al., 2003) and skirt learning responsibilities. In addition to potential inconsistencies in the evaluation of assessments (Plank, 2013) and struggles with understanding conflicting views, student experience of the learning environment can become compromised. For example, the second author found that in one case of co-teaching graduate students, the approach of bringing together different teaching styles and approaches initially created some uncertainty. Though believing debate and discussion to be valuable learning tools, the team was self-aware enough to understand that debate may exacerbate initial ambiguity and hamper learning. Thus, they took steps to reduce potential misunderstandings by discussing each session’s content before entering the classroom and identifying points of disagreement as well as how these would be dealt with in the classroom. Their focus was on encouraging academic debate but minimising confusion. This led to an approach where points of agreement and contention were explicitly communicated in-class, usually with a healthy dose of humour and mutual appreciation. By doing this, the team modelled respect, healthy academic debate and acknowledgement of diversity.

Optimising Team Teaching

Communication

A key point is that team teaching only works if the team sets up effective communication networks (Conn, 2010; Room 241 Team, 2012), such as regular formal team meetings, emails, phone calls and impromptu discussions (Kaplan, 2012). All members need to be active and interactive communicators (Benjamin, 2000), thereby creating a culture of review and enquiry. Everyone brings different strengths to a team and these are only discovered through discussion. Communication becomes even more important considering that work teams could easily result in team members working in isolation without regular communication. The overall aim of any communication always needs to be focused on consistency to students (Booth et al., 2003).

Communication, however, should not be limited to curriculum matters (Donnison et al., 2009; Plank, 2013) or the planning stage alone (Meizlish & Anderson, 2018). Relationship theories tell us that all relationships need maintenance (Fuller & Bail, 2011) especially if a team wants to develop a collegial and supportive teaching environment. A coffee after class, for example, is a simple way to develop
connections on a more personal level (Crawford & Jenkins, 2018). Students find it easier to consider teachers personable if they observe them involved in personal relationships. And, as supported by Chen and Cheng (2014), it is important to remember to have fun while teaching in teams. Students benefit from learning in a contented environment, as do teachers.

**Commitment to Team**

Some researchers have argued that teams can suffer from personality conflicts and/or teacher rivalry (Chandra & Sotille, 2005; Jenkins & Crawford, 2016). Though a reality, professionalism should always override such conflicts. In the authors’ experience, high-functioning teaching teams are diverse but are united by their interest in the subject material and educating students. Each team member has something different to contribute to the curricula, teaching approach and the learning experiences of students. While this can lead to occasional conflict, it is important to remember that the success of teams is not limited to specific, homogenous groups (Dyrud, 2010).

A successful team comprises individuals who are prepared to commit to the success of the team (Jenkins & Crawford, 2016) and who have confidence in each other (Bradstreet Grinois, & Waller, 2010) to act professionally at all times. For example, team members should meet agreed deadlines, and if team members are unhappy with another member’s behaviour, they should feel free to challenge them (Donnison et al., 2009). In the authors’ experiences, it is not uncommon for team members to remind others that they have missed a deadline. This is not only a way of keeping the team on track, but is an opportunity to offer support if team members are under too much pressure thus enacting collegiality.

For members to commit to a team, it is important for that team to have a clear direction (Conn, 2010), while allowing room for compromise (Booth et al. 2003), flexibility and adaptability (Crawford & Jenkins, 2018). Co-teaching teams, for instance, should be able to change direction in the middle of class if it enables the team to better meet the learning outcomes. Not all classes will go as planned and a team is better able to assess this than an individual. There is security that comes from the support of colleagues to more effectively meet student needs; it is not the opinion of just one teacher being relied on. Much of this safety comes from the trust that has been developed within the team (Donnison et al., 2009; Liebel et al., 2017), which also enables individuals to remain authentic in their teaching.

**Approaches to Student Learning**

Ultimately teaching teams exist solely for the benefit of students’ learning, and there are a few strategies that can be employed to ensure this happens. For instance, all students should be treated as the entire team’s students (Kaplan, 2012). As mentioned earlier, a drawback of team teaching is the difficulty of getting to know all the students due to larger class sizes, coupled with difficulties of instilling positive attitudes towards learning and knowledge in larger groups (van Amelsvoort & den Ouden, 2010). Although the class is treated as one by the entire team, throughout the year opportunities should be provided for students to work in smaller groups with individual members of the teaching team. For example, in one course, student groups are assigned individual teachers to allow for a closer connection. In another course, team members consciously circulate amongst different students each week, so they get to know more of the students. For in-class presentations, parallel
sessions can be organised, again enabling individual teachers to work with a smaller group of students. Break-away groups are acceptable as long as the overall student experience remains consistent. For assessment purposes, not every member may need to grade every assignment, but unity and consistency are achieved with the aid of grading rubrics (Bradstreet Grinois & Waller, 2010).

As discussed earlier, classroom management needs to be explicitly addressed before entering the classroom. For example, Meizlish and Anderson (2018) outlined the importance of deciding how students’ questions will be managed in and out of the classroom. For instance, where students email the same question to each member of the teaching team without openly copying other teachers into the same email, one teaching team member may reply but copy the other members in. In doing so, consistency is achieved and good team communication is implicitly modelled. In the classroom, some teams prefer the expert on a specific topic to answer questions, while others answer as a team, happy to accept interruptions from colleagues. Either option can work as long as the strategy benefits students’ learning.

Combined Learning
Regardless of the chosen approach, there will be not a single one to suit all students’ learning needs. The benefit of a team approach is that there are more opportunities to offer different options to students. Blended learning advocates claim that even individual students need more than one approach to optimise their learning (Crawford & Jenkins, 2015). To achieve this, the focus needs to be more on the learning experience than on the course content (Crawford & Jenkins, 2018). For example, in one second year public relations writing course, the concept of a reflective writing journal was introduced. Students reflect on their writing process and the teaching team can provide written feedback outside the classroom or comment in-class. Other options may include one-on-one progress meetings, team meetings with account directors (for a practice-based course), written student meeting minutes distributed to teachers, and oral progress reports shared with the entire class in an effort to keep everyone abreast of progress. In other words, a team environment enables teachers to explore a wider range of delivery and communication options, thus better servicing students’ learning needs.

iTeams
This paper started with the title “There is no ‘I’ in team” … but there should be. … but thus far the focus has been on why, and how to, implement team teaching. There is no denying that the success of team teaching depends on successful teaching teams. This does not mean, however, that members need to morph into identical individuals in order to be effective team members. Indeed, team members should have a strong sense of individual identity in order to contribute effectively. Identity is both a collective and individual concept (Wenger, 2012), and no member can be expected to forego their individual identities. Although members will become part of the collective identity, they should be able to bring individual practice to the team (Mercieca, 2017). In fact, teams benefit from an assortment of input, and diverse individual team member contributions should be sought (Meizlish & Anderson, 2018). These should be valued equally (Booth, Dixon-Brown, & Kohut, 2003). Team teaching cannot work if individuals feel impeded from being their unique selves and feel pressured to conform. As discussed earlier, the success of a team is dependent
on its diversity, and in a tertiary institution, this will include the freedom to hold a different view and opinion or, academic freedom.

One way to acknowledge individual uniqueness is to encourage individual professional development (Henning-Smith, 2018). Each team member will have different research interests, strengths and development needs. Allowing individuals to bring these needs and interests into the curriculum brings diversity to the content while validating an individual member’s contribution. In doing so, a teacher’s professional identity is boosted through experiencing success in their own teaching as result of being involved in a community of practice (Mercieca, 2017). Teams should therefore allow space for self- and social-creation (Marginson & Dang, 2017), tying in with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, which claims that individuals shape and are shaped by their environment (Mercieca, 2017).

Although learning is connected to the context within which it takes place (Chen & Cheng, 2014; Johnson, 2006):

[t]he focus on the social aspect of learning is not a displacement of the person. On the contrary, it is an emphasis on the person as a social participant, as a meaning-making entity for whom the social world is a resource for constructing an identity (Wenger, 2012, p. 2).

Conclusion

Team teaching is a model for future education practice (Booth et al., 2003); its benefits far outweigh its drawbacks. In the authors’ experiences, student learning has been enhanced by a move from an exclusive curriculum focus to a learning approach, including team interactions. It has helped in strengthening the public relations curriculum by assisting with the transfer of tacit subject and teaching knowledge as well as modelling skills and behaviours that contribute to effective public relations practice. Though it does not reduce the demands of teaching or workload placed on higher education teachers, if well-managed, team teaching provides a collegial and supportive environment in which the demands can be managed more effectively.

But team teaching alone is not a guarantee for success. After all, like any method of teaching, success is not inherent in the method but depends on how it is designed and implemented (Plank, 2013, p. 2). For those seeking to implement and optimise team teaching, careful consideration needs to be given to its purpose and place in a specific environment. Institutional and course demands may limit types of team teaching that can be implemented.

Ultimately, however, teams function best when individuals continue to be allowed to shine and apply their diverse knowledge and skills to enrich the public relations curriculum and students’ learning.

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