

Thoughts on team teaching:

In our American Studies program at New Trier, it's frequently been the case that teachers are paired as partners and given the freedom to discern a model of team teaching that works for them. We value this freedom, but we also think it would benefit teams – both new and experienced – to have a statement clarifying some characteristics of team teaching. Team teaching is different than working in a classroom as a single teacher, and the following paragraphs make several assertions about the nature of this different art. We've started with "thoughts on team teaching" *before* we get to the American Studies "Course Overview" because we argue that the partnership as a teaching team precedes the content of the course. Obviously, course content drives the discussions teams have about the choices they make in the classroom, but the partnership is, in a sense, the starting point.

Assertions about team teaching...

All classroom environments should be student centered, and as individual teachers, good planning always privileges student learning. The team-taught classroom isn't any different, but it does offer teachers a significant challenge: how to integrate two distinct disciplines and teaching styles in order to create a meaningful learning experience for students.

Working as a teaching team is a creative process, and the partnership between teachers is the starting point for a team-taught course. As is the case with any process, time is critical. Our research and collective experiences as a course committee have continually raised this issue of time. Planning time, in particular, is crucial for a successful teaching team, but time considerations extend beyond just having time to meet to plan units and lessons. An *Educational Leadership* article in 1993 captures the importance of time: "The time necessary to examine, reflect on, amend, and redesign programs is not *auxiliary* to teaching responsibilities – nor is it 'released time' from them. It is absolutely central to such responsibilities, and essential to making school succeed" (Raywid, page 34, V. 51, issue 1). Sufficient time will also allow teachers to learn each other's styles, maximize their special talents and areas of expertise, find ways to set common goals, and in general, find a collaborative process that works. (For additional notes on the importance of sufficient planning time see page 31 of *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation*.)

Fittingly, our experiences and research also indicate that teachers prefer to stay in their teaching teams and resist personnel changes (page 58, [A Guide to Co-Teaching](#)). At New Trier, we've had teaching teams change over the years and teachers have managed these changes successfully, but teachers wanting to stay in their teams makes sense in light of the time investment they make in developing into a team. Starting anew is, in some respects, starting from scratch (pages 78, 117, [A Guide to Co-Teaching](#)).

But even more than just having sufficient time, team teachers must constantly find ways to be flexible in their partnerships. In a non team-taught course, even though teachers collaborate at the course committee level, there isn't the immediate, in-class partnership that exists in a team-taught course. In a sense, the instructor of a non team-taught course has more freedom to try an instructional approach or organize a unit or lesson in a particular manner without having to consider the demands of another

discipline and the concerns of a teaching partner. With interdisciplinary teaching, due to the demands of each discipline, teachers must make important curricular choices – not choices that compromise the integrity of their separate disciplines – but choices that privilege opportunities to further join the disciplines and thereby create more meaningful learning experiences for students. Due to the nature of this partnership, team teachers must be willing to embrace innovative ways of meeting their goals. With time and flexibility comes more familiarity as a team, and with greater familiarity comes a sense that the course they teach is one unified course, rather than two courses taught side-by-side by teachers from separate disciplines.

Team teaching is a bottom-up and not a top-down process. Because teachers can't predict exactly what their partnership will look like, and because they need an opportunity to grow in their collaboration, a simplified, standardized model of team teaching rarely works. Successful team teaching can take many forms, some of which we'll address later in this document. As is the case with any collaboration, there's a level of unpredictability in what the process will look like and what the exact outcome will be. Team teachers must be comfortable with this sort of ambiguity. Moreover, this ambiguity is not a weakness, but a strength. From ambiguity often arise creative solutions to meeting students' needs as learners, and working with ambiguity is an opportunity to model for our students what true inquiry looks like.