

Partners in Pedagogy

Collaboration Between University and Secondary School Foreign Language Teachers

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One of the challenges facing many foreign language programs today is maintaining high quality instruction despite increased enrollments and teacher shortages. One strategy for meeting this challenge is collaborative teaching. Collaborative teaching can occur in various settings and for different purposes. Studies of team-teaching have shown its effectiveness in foreign language learning and teaching, especially at the introductory level (Braun & Robb, 1991; Magnan, 1987). These studies focus on situations in which an experienced college teacher works with a graduate assistant or a part-time instructor in a 4- or 5-day schedule. Results show that the number of foreign language minors and majors gradually increases, and students' motivation and interest are heightened by the variety of foreign language accents and teaching styles to which they are exposed (Braun & Robb, 1991). Teaching with graduate students is only one way of teaching collaboratively. Other types of collaboration can be considered, depending on the particular needs of the program.

This digest discusses the major issues in collaborative teaching and describes a successful collaborative program that paired college faculty with area high school teachers to team-teach introductory French and Spanish courses at the Plattsburgh State University of New York.

Benefits of Collaborative Teaching

Team-teaching offers the following advantages:

- Participating instructors bring different expertise to the teaching assignment.
- The process of working with other teachers is itself intellectually stimulating and promotes professional growth.
- Pedagogical exchanges facilitate coordination and lead to a more coherent teaching structure.
- Learners benefit from the different teaching perspectives and styles.
- Some students may respond better to one style than to another or may understand material better when presented using one technique as opposed to another.

Essential Components of an Effective Collaborative Teaching Program

According to Austin and Baldwin (1991), effective collaborative instruction involves the recognition of common goals, coordinated efforts, and outcomes based on shared responsibilities. Establishing policies and guidelines for collaborative work is essential. However, constant interaction and communication are the real keys to success. The following components are essential to collaborative teaching:

- Development of clear guidelines for the sharing of responsibilities among teachers, such as supervision of particular ses-

sions, meeting coordination, and exam committee participation.

- Establishment of course objectives, using common syllabi and standardized testing procedures.
- Determination of meeting times to discuss pedagogical issues such as course pace, teaching techniques, instructional materials, and student performance and progress.
- Encouragement of class observation exchanges with open discussions for providing feedback and suggestions for improvement on teaching collaboration.

The Partners in Pedagogy Program

The Partners in Pedagogy Program provides important insights into collaborative teaching between university faculty and secondary school teachers. The program was carried out at the Plattsburgh State University of New York during the 1993-1994 and 1994-1995 academic years (see Lee & Henning, 1999). The university had been increasingly challenged to provide effective instruction in spite of dwindling resources and increased enrollments in introductory foreign language courses. The chair of the department of foreign languages developed a plan for restructuring the foreign language program. The plan involved recruiting area high school teachers to help team-teach the university's introductory-level foreign language courses. These high school teachers would be paired with members of the university's French and Spanish departments. To recruit high school teachers, the university offered prospective applicants the choice of a stipend or graduate credit for their service.

Once the program was implemented, all beginning-level French and Spanish courses were taught under the collaborative structure. Students attended classes 4 days per week. College faculty met with groups of 30 students on Mondays and Wednesdays for presentation of grammatical structures and for practice in reading comprehension and writing. The high school teachers met with groups of 12-15 students on Tuesdays and Thursdays for conversational practice of the grammatical structures learned in the Monday-Wednesday sessions and for vocabulary building and cultural activities. Because these teachers also had teaching positions at local secondary schools, the conversation classes were scheduled during the late afternoon.

Major Goals

The program had three major goals: (1) to facilitate pedagogical cooperation between college foreign language and literature faculty and local middle school and high school teachers, (2) to improve articulation between secondary and postsecondary foreign language curricula, and (3) to develop the communicative skills of students, particularly speaking and listening, despite increased class sizes.

Program Structure

Using the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, the Partners in Pedagogy Program set proficiency goals for the beginning-level Spanish and French courses. The Guidelines were used as a framework for curriculum design, instructional objectives, and evaluation. College faculty were responsible for coordinating each course. They set up weekly meetings with their partners—the high school teachers with whom they were paired—to discuss important issues related to course pace and synchronization of instructional activities, syllabi, instructional materials, testing procedures, and grading criteria. Syllabi were standardized to ensure uniform instruction. Common midterm and final exams were designed by each team and included oral components.

Program Outcomes

All students in first year Spanish and French classes were surveyed each semester of the 2 years the program was in place. Local school instructors who participated in the program were surveyed as well. Overall, both students and teachers reacted positively to the program.

Student reactions to the program

Students reported gaining valuable experiences through the program. They were able to practice their language skills and acquire cultural knowledge through a variety of teaching styles and accents. The students felt they had more opportunities to “use the target language to express, interpret and negotiate meaning with others” (Savignon, 1983) and to review what they had learned in their Monday-Wednesday classes during the Tuesday-Thursday sessions, because the size of the classes allowed for small group and paired activities. In addition, the learning atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, making them comfortable about working collaboratively with their peers.

Participating instructors' reactions to the program

The area teachers reported benefiting professionally from the opportunity to use their foreign language training in the college setting. Both college faculty and area teachers felt they had learned from each other in an intellectually stimulating atmosphere as they shared and exchanged ideas in order to maintain the coherence of the course components. They also learned how to organize their class time more effectively to incorporate interactive exercises and cultural activities for both big and small groups. Although there were some disagreements between high school teachers and college faculty regarding instructional approach, course pace, correction, grading, and classroom management, together they were able to work out procedures and criteria to use throughout the program.

In addition, teachers reported benefiting from discussing pedagogical issues with colleagues from other secondary schools as well as with college faculty. The secondary school teachers also became much more aware of the requirements of the college program. They understood better what material needed to be covered in high school, what skills students needed to acquire, and what pace had to be maintained for students to continue successfully in the college program. Senior college faculty who had not taught first-year classes for a while enjoyed the program and received high marks on student evaluations.

Articulation Between Secondary and College-Level Curricula

The Partners in Pedagogy Program was helpful in establishing smoother links between secondary and college-level instruction. The college faculty had repeatedly complained about the

weak cognitive and general learning skills of incoming students. The high school teachers were able to see firsthand what was expected of incoming college students. The partnership helped to open a dialogue between area teachers and college program coordinators and led to the discussion of articulation issues in May 1994 at a full-day workshop sponsored jointly by the North County Teacher Resource Center Foreign Language Network, the Plattsburgh Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, and the Northern Tier of the New York State Association of Foreign Language Teachers (NYSAFLT). College faculty and high school teachers discussed how the college curricular objectives could mesh better with those at the secondary level as well as with the requirements of professional life and beyond. Together, teachers and college faculty recognized that all of the different levels of foreign language instruction are interrelated, and that they must be considered as part of a continuum. The participating teachers shared what they had learned from the program and agreed that the goals for the end of beginning courses were realistic and consistent with the state syllabus that they were following. Both college faculty and high school teachers felt the need for higher standards for foreign language skills, for more consistent evaluative criteria, and for more reliable assessment instruments.

Conclusion

Research has shown that collaborative foreign language teaching offers many benefits to both students and teachers. Team-teaching provides students with a meaningful and unique way to gain language and cultural competence and offers teachers opportunities for professional exchanges.

The Partners in Pedagogy Program was a worthy effort toward improving coordination between secondary and college-level foreign language instruction in the North County of Upstate New York and provides a model of a cooperative structure that brings together high school and college foreign language teachers as members of instructional teams. The experiences of the Partners in Pedagogy Program also underscores the obvious need for frequent communication and clear policies as well as articulated guidelines for collaborative work. Continued collaboration between secondary school teachers and university professors should be encouraged to improve the articulation between these two levels of instruction.

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