

TEAM TEACHING THE ACTIVE WAY: A CASE STUDY ABOUT THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to describe the students' learning experience when utilizing a team teaching approach in an online doctoral program at a private university located within the Southwestern region of the United States. The theoretical foundation of Community of Inquiry developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) supported this study. The overarching question that drove this study was, "How do students in an online doctoral program describe the team teaching learning experience?" The sample consisted of six doctoral students from a private university enrolled in an online doctoral course. Participants were interviewed and videotaped using Zoom. Data were obtained through semistructured interviews with open-ended questions that focused on the student experience. The interviews were transcribed and coded to identify themes. The discussion of the findings included the importance of access to the instructor, instructor feedback, and student support. Participants reported that their student learning experience was enhanced due to the team teaching model. Future research should examine the team teaching model from the perspective of the instructor and from a variety of courses.

Keywords: team teaching, online, doctoral students, community of inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that to ensure that students learn and grow in the online learning environment, faculty must engage in effective instructional techniques (Clark, 2012; Winter, 2015). Meeting the demands for online instruction and developing the learner's expertise is an important factor in a doctoral program. The key to creating an effective online learning environment is to provide multiple ways for students to engage in developing and enhancing their critical thinking, communication, and writing skills. The theoretical foundation of the Community of Inquiry developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000, supports this study. According to them, the Community of Inquiry framework has three interactions that should take place in an online learning environment: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Social presence allows the participants to engage personally with

each other as real individuals. Cognitive presence provides intellectual stimulation by exploring and integrating research through different forms of online communication. Teacher presence promotes instruction and facilitation of resources and material for student success. Therefore, if teacher presence is effectively established, social presence of student engagement is positively established (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009). This study used a team teaching approach to connect all three interactions by utilizing strategies and collaboration to enhance doctoral students' academic success.

Team Teaching Approach

Engaging students in developing and learning skills can be one of the greatest challenges online instructors encounter. The team teaching approach allows two instructors to share responsibilities for the course and be present throughout the entire

course. The research supports that having two teachers fully engaged and active in the learning environment is effective (Bennett & Fisch, 2013). In order for a team-teaching approach to be effective, both teachers should have the skills necessary to instruct, facilitate, and collaborate with other teachers (Chanmugam & Gerlach, 2013). Faculty that are able to effectively team teach provide a rich comfortable learning environment that assists in developing critical thinking, communication, and social skills for student success. During team teaching opportunities, faculty should allow time for collaboration, conversation, analysis, and reflection that focuses on areas of strength and growth. The goal should include providing quality feedback, instruction, resources, and a holistic education in the online learning environment for doctoral students. The team teachers can create a learning environment that supports mutual respect, develops academic skills, and positively engages in meaningful learning (Green, 1999). Both instructors should focus on implementing effective and efficient team teaching strategies.

Strategies for Team Teaching

Team teaching in an online learning environment may promote effective and efficient instruction to meet the needs of doctoral students. Prepared and aligned instructors can provide timely feedback, different perspectives about topics, and promptly returned email or phone communication (Scribner-Maclean & Miller, 2011). The instructors should collaborate on how to effectively provide meaningful learning in the online environment. Some strategies that team teaching instructors should focus on are (1) enhancing discussions in the forum, (2) providing timely feedback, (3) adding stimulating questions, (4) returning emails and phone calls in a timely manner, (5) integrating diverse learning tools, and (6) facilitating course management. Implementing effective team teaching strategies may decrease the number of challenges online instructors and doctoral students may encounter, such as anxiety, frustration, confusion, and time management. Providing immediate feedback and answering questions for clarity about assignments can reduce these challenges (Scribner-Maclean & Miller, 2011). Another way to reduce challenges for instructors and doctoral students is to add additional resources and further explanations

for assignments to help clarify objectives and expectations. Though effective collaboration and utilizing quality strategies, instructors can establish a different perspective for doctoral students to help strengthen their critical thinking and writing skills. Team-teaching collaboration in an online learning environment provides diverse facilitation strategies (Williams, Evans, & Metcalf, 2010).

Collaboration

One of the crucial elements when considering a team teaching approach is collaboration between the faculty members. Friend (2008) described collaborative teaching as interaction between at least two parties who are voluntarily engaged within a shared decision. Within the team teaching model, both instructors share the responsibilities within the classroom and both evaluate and monitor student needs and learning (Tasdemir & Yildirim, 2017). Tasdemir and Yildirim (2017) suggested that while the contributions of the individual instructors may vary in a team teaching model, the instructors must work together to create a learning environment that one single instructor could create on their own. The advantages of collaboration are that when instructors combine their knowledge and skills, the learning environment is flexible yet rigorous, instruction is differentiated, expertise is shared on multiple levels and through different media, and, in general, each student's learning style is more likely to be considered (York-Barr, Ghore, & Sommerness, 2007). Additionally, collaboration allows instructors to be more reflective of their practices so they can make improvements in future instruction (York-Barr et al., 2007).

Doctoral Students

While the importance of a doctoral degree is recognized for those seeking a terminal degree, fewer than half of those who start a doctoral program actually graduate, and in many programs the percentage of those who leave often exceeds the graduation rate (Greene, 2015). While student success is variable, research has shown that effective academic and support services play an important role in doctoral student success (Polson, 2003). Some research has suggested that the greater the socialization of the doctoral student, the less likely the student is to leave their program (Greene, 2015; Polson, 2003). Brandes (2006) suggested that efforts should be paid to make graduate

students feel valued, while Greene (2015) posited that the greater the interaction and the deeper the relationship that is developed between student and faculty, the higher the likelihood the student would persist through the program.

METHODS

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to describe the students learning experience when utilizing a team teaching approach in an online doctoral program at a private university located within the Southwestern region of the United States. The review of literature revealed a lack of studies regarding the student experience within a team teaching model in the online environment. Team teaching within the online environment does present some challenges that are not present within a traditional classroom setting; however, the topic is relevant to explore at this level in order to enhance the student learning experience and ultimately seek to improve student retention and success. The overarching question that drove this study was, how do students in an online doctoral program describe the team teaching learning experience?

Participants

The participants involved in the study came from four sections of the second course within the leadership tract in the doctoral program. Overall, 75 students were enrolled, 9 students withdrew from the courses for unknown reasons, and 12 students failed the course. Ultimately, 54 students successfully completed those sections with a grade of C or higher for a retention rate of 82%. Of those 54 students, six students agreed to participate within the study and be interviewed using Zoom.

Procedures

Students were informed in the first week of the course about the team teaching model and the role that each instructor would assume during the course. Since it was only possible to have one instructor of record, each instructor was the primary instructor for two sections. The primary instructor provided grading and feedback on all formal assignments while the second instructor provided grading and feedback for the discussion questions and student participation responses. Both instructors answered questions within the course and both instructors contributed to weekly class discussion forums.

In the final week of the course, students were provided a link to SurveyMonkey, which included a general demographic survey and the informed consent. Within the survey, students were asked to agree to the informed consent and indicate if they would like to be contacted to complete an interview following the completion of the course and after the final grades had been posted. Nine students indicated that they would like to participate within the interview; however, only six students responded when contacted via email to schedule.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted using Zoom Video Conferencing and were recorded for transcription. Students were asked open-ended questions focused on the specific experiences of what worked, what failed, and the overall experience. Some examples are:

- How did this experience of team teaching differ from your experience in your first class with a single instructor?
- Please describe your expectations regarding a team teaching model.
- Did you feel the inclusion of two instructors helped you or did it hinder you within the course? And how it may have helped you and how it may have hindered you for your growth or your learning process?

Data Analysis

Following completion of the interviews, the interviews were transcribed and then forwarded to the participants for member checking. Gay and Mills (2011) describe member checking as a vital step in qualitative research for the purposes of both accuracy and reliability. The next step involved reading and rereading them “to obtain a sense of the whole” (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 11), to determine relevant content to the study, and to begin to identify common themes and/or patterns in responses. The analysis then focused on inductive identification of keywords and phrases to establish categories of meaning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis resulted in the grouping of the data according to the following categories: access to an instructor, feedback, and support.

Access to an Instructor

Student A explained,

with two teachers, if both of you or if either one of you were gone and I had questions that needed an immediate response and I didn't understand, you were very clear. If Dr. Winter didn't explain it, Dr. Davis would come in or one of you would come in and make sure that I understood.

Student C echoed this sentiment, "At times it seemed like I only had to wait a few minutes to be answered when I posted a question. I felt like someone was always in the course and that I could have my questions answered quickly." Student D explained a specific time when there was a conversation regarding dissertation topics,

I ended up going in a completely different direction with my proposed topic because both Dr. Winter and Dr. Davis provided me information. Even though I did get feedback in my first class about my topic, it was nice to see the perspective of both these instructors. It almost did not seem like an online course because I felt like I could reach out to either of them at any time. An online class can be very isolating but I think this approach helped me feel more comfortable and less alone.

Feedback

Student F stated, "I guess y'all had more time to evaluate our assignments before I got feedback that was broken down. You had time to tell me what I needed to fix and things I could improve on." Student E explained that,

I know the instructors have a lot of students and a lot of grading but I felt like with two instructors, I received feedback on assignments quicker and it was more thorough and thoughtful feedback. Rather than only being told what I was going wrong, they highlighted what I was doing right, and still gave me suggestions to improve.

Student B reported,

sometimes a critique can be hard to hear especially for someone like me who is used to getting all As, but I never felt like I was

truly being critiqued rather I was being provided opportunities to grow as a writer. I really appreciated that aspect

Student A said,

you supported me more because I got immediate feedback either from one or both of you at the same time. I got immediate feedback, you were very supportive, you had more time to catch me and see how it was, "is everything okay? Because everyone has turned in and you haven't turned in the assignment yet." That sort of thing. You were able to see my progress, you gave great feedback. You have more time to study what I did and what I didn't do. You gave great feedback, I really didn't see any kind of hindrance at all. Everything was very supportive because both of you were reaching out at the same time and I felt comfortable in any case. Especially when I got confused at the very beginning, you know you both kind of sent me messages, and one of you called to make sure that I understood.

Support

Support as it related to team teaching included "personalized support" (Student A), "took the time to call" (Student C), the abundance of provided materials in terms of videos, articles, and other resources (Students D and F), "it felt collaborative even between myself and both instructors and they were a good team" (Student E), and that overall it just felt like a supportive and constructive environment (Student B). Student A explained that at the beginning of the course, she was struggling with a couple of the assignments that she did not understand,

one of you called me and I was like "oh my God" I couldn't believe that you actually took the time to call me. That personalized my learning and I appreciate it so much. Also it created more of a support for me as a student because both of it were there.

DISCUSSION

This study began by highlighting the student experience with team teaching in an online doctoral

program. The researchers did not seek to establish whether the experience was positive or negative; however, the results indicated that all participants felt that their learning experience was enhanced due to the team teaching model. The findings of the study indicated that students felt more supported and less isolated, and they felt that feedback on assignments was quality feedback and was returned quickly. The study also provides empirical support to the Community of Inquiry framework proposed by Garrison et al. (2000) in which, for effective learning to occur within an online environment, there must be a social presence, a cognitive presence, and teaching presence.

An important aspect of this study was the collaboration that occurred between the instructors. While the instructors each held a specific role within each section of the course, they established a partnership between themselves and shared that rapport with the students as well. Friend (2008) suggested that this teaching model requires at least two parties to be engaged in the shared decision-making process and their shared roles in the classroom to ensure that the needs of students are met (Tasdemir & Yildirim, 2017). It is through collaboration that the student learning experience is developed, and instructors are able to enhance their instruction through interaction with not only students but with an additional instructor.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was conducted in a single university and in a single class with multiple sections. It is not clear whether this type of teaching would be feasible long term within the doctoral program as it increases the student load on the instructors involved and does not allow for the instructors to be assigned to other courses because it would exceed the maximum student count for an instructor, nor is it clear if this type of model would be feasible in other settings. The results of the study only described the participants involved within this study and their experiences; it is possible that with the small sample size that these results cannot be generalized.

This study investigated only student experiences, and while the researchers were the instructors in these sections of course, the instructor experience was not examined. While the focus was on the student experience with the anticipation that the findings may contribute to student success

and retention, it would be beneficial to examine the instructor experience as well. The online environment differs greatly from the traditional face-to-face model of instruction and ways to enhance the environment for all stakeholders would be beneficial.

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