Communicating and Collaborating in Co-Taught Classrooms

Greg Conderman
Sarah Johnston-Rodriguez
Paula Hartman

Communicating and Collaborating in Co-Taught Classrooms

Greg Conderman
Sarah Johnston-Rodriguez
Paula Hartman

Abstract

Co-teaching is gaining popularity as an instructional delivery service for supporting students in diverse classrooms. In spite of recent research indicating its effectiveness, co-teaching does not always realize its potential; often due to interpersonal or communication issues occurring between co-teachers. This article describes ways co-teachers can understand and respond effectively to their co-teacher's interpersonal style in order to maximize the professional satisfaction and success of co-teaching.

Keywords

collaboration, co-teaching, communication skills

8th grade math teacher Mr. Gillespie and special educator Ms. Marcos have been co-teaching in a diverse classroom for half a semester. After eight weeks of co-teaching, however, each member of this team is unsatisfied with their professional roles, and both teachers wonder if they should continue this partnership. Mr. Gillespie senses that Ms. Marcos does not like being part of the math class because she is very quiet. In reality, Ms. Marcos often feels put on the spot by Mr. Gillespie's spontaneous comments and questions, for which she is unprepared. Like hundreds of co-teaching teams across the country, Mr. Gillespie and Ms. Marcos may have neglected an important aspect of co-teaching, which is understanding the communication or collaboration style of their partner. Is it too late for this team, or can they nurture this fledgling partnership?

One approach for meeting the unique challenges in diverse classrooms is co-teaching. Friend and Cook (2007) described co-teaching as a service delivery model for providing special education or related services to students with special needs in the general education classroom. Generally, co-teaching consists of a general educator paired with a special educator or other licensed professional in a diverse inclusive classroom. Villa, Thousand, & Nevin (2008) noted that co-teaching assumes that teachers agree on a goal, share a common belief system, demonstrate parity, share leadership roles while completing tasks, and practice a cooperative process. These principles provide the foundation for creating a collaborative professional relationship and delivering effective instruction. In fact, co-teaching is often referred to as a marriage due to the close professional relationship that often develops between partners (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). But how do two teachers, who may

have different communication skills, personalities, and ways of dealing with conflict successfully navigate the complex process of co-teaching? This article describes how co-teachers can honor their partner's communication-collaboration style to create a successful co-teaching relationship.

Addressing the communication needs of teachers is essential for co-teaching success. Clearly, co-teachers need to know what their partner is thinking, feeling, doing, and bringing into the school environment in order to provide effective instruction for all students. Because collaboration is a necessity for both general and special educators, one of the most significant changes and challenges for most educators today is maintaining effective interpersonal skills with peers (Hourcade & Bauwens, 2003). School administrators and general educators expect to engage in effective, on-going communication with special educators (Cramer, 2006). However, many special education teacher preparation programs do not emphasize application of communication and collaboration skills even though beginning special education teachers often find collaboration one of the most challenging aspects of their positions (Conderman, Morin, & Stephens, 2005; Conderman & Stephens, 2000). Consequently, teachers often express a need for additional training in collaborative consultation skills and effective communication skills (Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Walther-Thomas, 1997).

In fact, many co-teachers are very emphatic about the importance of effective communication skills in their co-teaching roles. Co-teachers frequently report personal compatibility as the most critical variable for co-teaching success and attribute weak teacher collaboration skills as the reason for its failure (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Teachers whose perspectives differ

most significantly are the least likely to collaborate effectively, and mismatches between teachers create discord and independent thinking rather than shared problem solving (Dettmer, Thurston, Knackendoffel, & Dyck, 2009). Similarly, any collaborative relationship can be doomed if one partner dominates or leads in a direction that the other partner is not expecting (Murawski & Dieker, 2004). Clearly, the collaborative nature of schools today requires that all teachers have effective adult-to-adult interaction skills.

Where Do We Start?

Co-teachers may need direction in the beginning of their professional relationship to guide their initial efforts. Admittedly, co-teaching is a developmental process that involves open communication and interaction, mutual admiration, and compromise (Gately & Gately, 2001). In short, co-teaching requires a commitment to the evolution of the collaborative process (Dieker & Barnett, 1996). With an administrator or mentor as a guide or as a team, co-teachers can begin by discussing their beliefs about teaching, learning, classroom management, noise, and pet peeves (Friend & Cook, 2007). Murawski and Dieker (2008) offered strategic questions for co-teachers to discuss before, during, and after co-teaching. Some "before" questions include: (a) Are you willing to try something new? (b) How many students in our co-taught classroom have disabilities, are gifted, or are otherwise exceptional? (c) Can we sit down and share our responses on our inventory assessment? and (d) How can we divide responsibilities, so that we will both benefit? Some "during" co-teaching questions include: (a)

> **In addition to assessing one's instructional, management, and assessment skills, co-teachers should also discuss their preferred communication and collaboration style.**

What are some actions that one of us can do while the other is leading an activity or giving a lecture? (b) What nonverbal sign can we use to indicate that we need a quick break? (c) Do any students need re-teaching, pre-teaching, or enrichment? and (d) What can we do to create an environment that is accepting of all students? Finally, some "after" co-teaching questions include: (a) Have we collected data to assess student performance and the effectiveness of co-teaching? (b) Is what we are doing good for both of us? (c) How do you prefer feedback, especially when one of us is not pleased? and (d) Would you do it all over again? Co-teachers should also note each person's responsibility and areas of expertise (Conderman & Bresnahan, 2007). To guide these initial discussions, co-teachers can assess their skills and strengths through various inventories (i.e., Conderman, Bresnahan, & Pedersen, 2008; Fattig & Taylor, 2008); Murawski & Dieker, 2004; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008); that outline each person's expertise and associated responsibilities or take meeting notes as reminders of each partner's unique skills. Completing an inventory provides an initial communication and planning tool. Further, putting thoughts in writing helps teams articulate their views and provides a product that teachers can frequently revisit and revise. Finally, this step avoids inaccurate assumptions about the knowledge and skills of the partner. Therefore, co-teachers must be honest and vulnerable in this step.

Communication / Collaboration Styles

Honoring the instructional expertise of the co-teaching partner is important yet insuf-

ficient for co-teaching success. In addition to assessing one's instructional, management, and assessment skills, co-teachers should also discuss their preferred communication and collaboration style. Some individuals frequently speak in word pictures, others focus on details; some are quiet by nature and typically avoid conflict, while others prefer a direct communication style. Understanding and respecting each other's preferred mode and method of communication fosters mutual respect, reduces the likelihood of being misunderstood, and maximizes collaboration. Further, as teachers address their own preferences, they become more capable and willing to relate, understand, and build on the work of their colleague (Dettmer et al. 2009).

Admittedly, effective communication is essential for co-teachers (Halvorson & Neary, 2009); the challenge is to communicate not in your preferred manner, *but in the manner preferred by your co-teacher.* In other words, rather than the Golden Rule (Do onto others as you would have them do onto you), co-teachers should use the Platinum Rule (Treat others the way *they* want to be treated) (Alessandra, 2007). Several available assessments provide valuable insight about one's personality or collaborative style, such as Gregorc's profiling learning style (Gregorc & Ward, 1977), Kolb's cognitive style concepts (Kolb, 1976), the 4MAT system (McCarthy, 1990), the Dunn and Dunn learning style assessment (Dunn & Dunn, 1978), and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1962). We have chosen to focus on three other assessments because of their easy access, recent publication dates, strong research-base, and their emphasis on providing helpful suggestions for working with others who have different styles or preferences.

The Platinum Rule (Alessandra, 2007) is based on the premise of first understanding your partner and then providing what *they* need. Alessandra notes four main styles, which are directors, socializers, relaters, and thinkers. Each has their own needs, strengths, and weaknesses. Directors, for example, are driven by the need to control and achieve, and they appreciate others who respect their time and provide bottom-line information. In co-teaching, directors respond best to partners who are efficient and competent. If you disagree with a director, argue with facts, not feelings. Socializers are idea-people who are enthusiastic and thrive on personal recognition. In co-teaching, show an interest in them and allow time for socialization during planning meetings. Relaters are excellent listeners and good planners who appreciate being talked to in terms of feelings, not facts. They avoid risks, so in co-teaching, make changes slowly and carefully, show sincere interest, earn their trust, and be non-threatening. Finally, thinkers tend to be slow and deliberate decision-makers who prefer facts and data. With thinkers, be thorough, well-prepared, detailed-oriented, business-like, and patient. Additional information about these styles as well as ways to relate to them and a free online informal assessment are noted on Alessandra's (2007) website.

Other researchers (e.g., Miscisin, 2007; Trent & Cox, 2006) have developed similar research-based assessment tools which can be taken on line for a nominal fee**.** Trent and Cox (2006) noted four main collaboration styles using an animal analogy. Each "animal" has a different way of solving problems and accepting challenges, trusting others and the information they provide, reacting to change and pace, and following established rules and procedures: (a) Lions use a more aggressive approach to problem solving, and they are determined, goal-driven, bold, self-reliant, and good decision makers;

(b) Otters are trusting and optimistic, and they like variety, are creative, fun-loving, risk takers, and they avoid details; (c) Golden Retrievers like a predictable work environment, and they tend to be good listeners, thoughtful, patient, nurturing, and they dislike change and conflict; and (d) Beavers like to follow established rules, and they are predictable, orderly, factual, detailed, and analytical. The on-line assessment provides strengths and limitations of each collaborative style as well as ways to work most effectively with these styles. Once again, the key to collaborating with others who have styles different than your own is to recognize their style and adjust your style accordingly to provide what they need.

Miscisin (2001) differentiated among the four following styles using a color analogy: (a) Oranges are individuals who are energetic, playful, desire change and are master negotiators; (b) Blues are individuals who are caretakers, optimistic, passionate, and enthusiastic; (c) Greens are individuals who are problem solvers, analytical, perfectionists, and logical; and (d) Golds are prepared, detailed oriented, conscientious, and have a strong sense of duty.

Table 1: Summary of Collaboration Styles

Alessandra (2007)	Trent and Cox (2006)	Miscisin (2001)
Directors need to control and achieve, so respect the agenda, maintain a business approach, and when possible allow them to make the decision.	*Lions* are demanding, driving, competitive, and responsible, so be prepared and organized.	*Oranges* value freedom, so be dynamic, clear, open-minded, and spontaneous.
Socializers like admiration and acknowledgment, so compliment them, do things together, and vary the routine.	*Otters* are inspiring, enthusiastic, optimistic, and trusting, so ask feeling questions and avoid too many details.	*Blues* value relationship, so provide individual attention, and be caring, sincere, pleasant, and approachable.
Relaters are risk-aversive, so discuss changes early, establish security through friendship and cooperation, and establish a personal and relaxed environment.	*Golden Retrievers* are passive, predictable, consistent, and steady, so allow them to focus on one project at a time, ask "how" questions, and do not force them to respond quickly.	*Greens* value competency, so understand their necessity to question your knowledge and facts and be precise, analytical, and ready for questions. Also, honor their need for privacy.
Thinkers are systematic and detail oriented, so provide details, be exact, be very clear on each teacher's roles, and over plan lessons.	*Beavers* are cautious, neat, exacting, and dependent, so be organized, accurate, and realistic.	*Golds* value responsibility, so count on them, show how much you value their efforts, and be accurate, consistent, organized, and reverent of traditions.

In summary, knowing your style, and that of your co-teacher, is an important first step in respecting and honoring each other and minimizing unnecessary conflict. Clearly, each style responds and reacts differently and needs different supports to feel validated and understood. Table 1 summarizes information about these various styles from these three inventories.

We emphasize that the purposes of these inventories are to: (a) help co-teachers become more aware of their own styles; (b) provide a discussion vehicle for co-teachers through which they can use a common language; (c) help co-teachers proactively examine areas for potential conflict; and (d) help co-teachers determine strategies for honoring their partner's needs. Co-teachers should reflect on their personal values and preferences before beginning intensive collaborative work. When teachers begin to address their own preferences, they become more able and willing to relate to their colleague's preferences. Finally, although most personality or communication inventories use labels to describe one's style, we caution against oversimplifying or generalizing complex structures such as personalities. Conclusions should not become labels, and rigid interpretations must give way to open-mindedness and respect (Dettmer et al. 2009).

Table 2: Getting to Know Your Co-Teacher's Collaborative Style

1. I would describe my personality as:

2. From my co-teacher, I would appreciate:

3. I will find co-teaching rewarding if:

4. In front of students, I would prefer that you do/do not:

5. My communication style with adults is:

6. I tend to deal with conflict by:

7. I will be embarrassed in class if you:

8. My approach for decision making is:

9. You can tell when I am stressed because I will:

10. Typically, when I am upset I:

Now What Do We Do?

Results from collaborative style inventories provide a vehicle for discussing ways to use each teacher's strengths within an environment that fosters respect. In lieu of these assessments, teachers can develop their own questions or complete and share sentence stems similar to those in Table 2.

To maximize the benefit of these assessment tools, we encourage co-teachers to consider the following five steps:

1) *Be honest in completing the assessments and sharing your preferences and needs with your co-teacher*. Carefully and honestly ask yourself: What is my approach to decision-making, problem solving, and handling conflict? Reflect on your communication style and what makes you comfortable. Be honest in sharing specific preferences associated with adult-to adult communication.

2) *Carefully and without judgment listen to your partner share his or her preferences and needs*. Setting time aside, sit down and discuss with your partner your respective views on teaching, communicating, and designing a classroom. Being able to listen to another's views is a critical step

in building relationships. Effective listening requires the listener to attend to what the other person is saying followed by a signal indicating that they have heard the person's message. Be sure to attend to both the verbal and nonverbal signals while listening. Effective listening involves both communicating our understanding of the message and obtaining accurate information (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002). Gathering information about your co-teaching partner, listening, and conveying a sincere interest in understanding their point of view builds rapport and establishes an important foundation for further relationship development.

3) *Compare and clarify information related to each other's preferences, needs, and priorities.* Discuss results to inventory questions and emphasize areas of commonality and agreement. Consider prioritizing differences and noting how you can accommodate each other's preference. If areas are not clear, thoughtfully ask your partner for more information. How you ask for clarification is important. Avoid asking "why" your co-teacher has a particular view. "Why" questions can be perceived as aggressive and may place your co-worker in a defensive posture. Instead, use "I" statements to clear up areas of confusion e.g., "I want to understand what you mean by a quiet classroom." or "What types of activities do you see as quiet?" or "Could you give me an example of a quiet classroom?" Similarly, ask open-ended questions that indicate a sincere interest in your co-teacher. Use follow-up questions to expand on your co-teacher's responses.

4) *With the information that you have learned about your co-teacher, monitor your verbal and non-verbal behavior during co-teaching efforts to see if they match your partner's requests and needs.* Using a personal "check and reflect" approach, evaluate your actions in regard to consideration of your co-teacher's needs and preferences. Being aware of your communication and collaboration skills is a first step, however that alone will not enhance your skills. Continued reflection, practice, and checking in with your partner for feedback are critical to improvement.

5) *Frequently reflect with your co-teacher to assess whether either of you need to make changes in your communication or collaborative approach.* Maintaining openness in your communication, attitudes, and judgment of a co-teacher's actions is essential to effective collaboration. In the co-teaching environment, openness refers to being able to set aside opinions and judgment about your partner's communication and behavior before interpreting its meaning.

If You Reach an Impasse

When co-teachers have a high level of agreement on an assessment item, or when their styles agree, they can quickly reach consensus and move onto the next discussion item. When honest responses result in disagreement, the team has some choices. Some of these include:

(a) *compromise*- both teachers agree to be flexible regarding their needs and reach a resolution that at least partly satisfies both partners. The advantage to compromise is that both teachers feel heard and have some of their needs met. Each teacher might say, "I

am comfortable meeting in the middle on this practice". However, teachers who compromise on extremely important issues may feel that they have lost power and personal integrity. Teachers in this situation could respond, "I am really uncomfortable compromising on this issue. This is very important to me."

(b) *accommodate*- one teacher agrees to implement the ideas of the partner. Accommodating is appropriate when the suggestion would improve practice, is appropriate for the class structure and co-teaching situation, or is not an extremely important issue to the one who is accommodating. Teachers who accommodate might say, "That's a good idea. I've never thought of doing that. Let's use that approach in our classroom."

(c) *try*- the team agrees to implement a method for an agreed period of time, assess its effectiveness, and reevaluate. This approach honors the co-teacher's suggestion and provides some time for teachers to test out an idea without committing themselves to it. A co-teacher might suggest: "Let's see if that idea will work with this group. How will we know if this is effective? How much time should we give the idea to see if it works?"

(d) *get support*- the team has reached an impasse, and they need some support from a mentor, coach, or building administrator. Perhaps a neutral third party can view the issue from a fresh perspective and offer insights the team had not considered.

(e) *exit the situation*- Although this may not always be possible, if co-teachers realize they have significant differences on several issues that they cannot resolve, they may wish to conclude their co-teaching efforts and seek other ways of providing support to the class. Perhaps, with the assistance of their administrator, they can utilize a different co-teacher, another licensed professional, a paraprofessional, or other classroom supports.

Using the Information

Using the five step process and these suggestions on dealing with an impasse helps co-teachers proactively honor their partner's needs, make adjustments as co-teaching evolves, and appreciate the unique contributions of the co-teacher as illustrated in the following examples:

- While co-teaching several sections of a high school science class, special educator Mr. McGregor felt nervous about not being in total command of the content. His style was one of perfection and not looking bad in front of others. Being vulnerable about his style allowed his co-teacher, Mr. Ravi, to avoid placing him in instructional situations that would embarrass him. Providing emotional safety was important, and once this was established, Mr. McGregor could contribute more freely to the co-teaching situation. The team brainstormed strategies Mr. McGregor could use if he felt uncomfortable during class regarding his lack of content knowledge. They also discussed ways Mr. McGregor could contribute meaningfully to each class session, become acquainted with the content, and assume greater instructional responsibilities with subsequent sections of the course during the day. Mr. Ravi realized that even though he could teach

> **Co-teachers should reflect on their personal values and preferences before beginning intensive collaborative work.**

most lessons with minimal preparation due to his years of experience teaching at this level, the content was new to his co-teacher, and he would need to be patient while Mr. McGregor faced this learning curve. In short, Mr. McGregor trusted him with a personal issue which he was committed to honor.

- When co-planning and co-reflecting on lessons, Miss Hartson, the special education co-teacher, preferred never to say anything critical about anyone. In fact, she avoided conflict at all costs. Mr. Ewing, her co-teacher, though, did not mind conflict and appreciated a no-nonsense and direct approach. He often said, "Just tell me what you are thinking. I won't get mad". Each member of the team learned to adjust their communication style to fit the style of their partner. Miss Hartson began to openly share her constructive feedback about lessons, which was well received, and Mr. Ewing learned to soften his feedback.

- Mrs. Mae, the special education co-teacher, began class with a few jokes or stories to warm up the class. Her language arts co-teacher, Mr. Walter, who was serious and quiet, was initially frustrated by this non-instructional use of time as he had many items on his checklist to complete during the co-taught lesson. Rather than immediately judging this behavior as a waste of time, Mr. Walter observed more carefully and reflected on how his co-teacher opened class. He observed that students who typically did not participate often shared stories or jokes and laughed during these first few minutes of class. Indeed, Mrs. Mae was able to relate to some of the more challenging students in class, students he found difficult to engage. After this reflection, the relaxing opening approach made sense, given the composition of the class. Mr. Walter even began to infuse some humor and adopt a more casual instructional style after observing its success. Similarly, Mrs. Mae respected Mr. Walter's more quiet and serious instructional approach and adopted some of his teaching phrases and behaviors when she needed the class to be more serious and focus on important skills.

Effective Communication Skills

In addition to adjusting one's style to honor the partner's needs, co-teachers need to use specific effective communication skills with their co-teacher. Some principles or tips of effective communication include:

1) *Make sure your verbal and non-verbal signs are congruent.* Mixed messages can confuse a partner. When a partner's voice inflection and body language do not match his/her words, a listener may not know to which message, the verbal or non-verbal, s/he should attend. If the co-teacher says, "I am very excited about this activity we are planning together," but her voice holds no animation or enthusiasm, the listener might wonder if the stated excitement is genuine and how much support they can actually expect from their partner for the upcoming activity. When a person speaks, they convey information through gestures, movements, facial expressions, body posture, and words (Covey, 2004). When all of the speaker's behaviors convey similar

meanings, the listener perceives the communication as authentic or approachable. Approachable people do not go out of their way to hide what they think and feel. They say what they mean and mean what they say (Maxwell, 2004). When the speaker's behaviors communicate conflicting messages, the listener becomes aware of the incongruence and may wonder if the speaker is trying to conceal feelings or attitudes that they are not expressing through words. "Whether we communicate with words or behavior, if we have integrity, our intent cannot be to deceive" (Covey, 2004, p. 197).

2.) *Use the appropriate communication tool for the purpose.* Today we have access to many communication methods. Direct face-to-face communication is augmented with telephone (cell phone), letter, fax, email, and text messaging. Correctly interpreting email and text messages is more difficult because of the absence of voice tone and nonverbal cues. We generally acknowledge long standing rules of etiquette for face-to-face communication; however, we are still developing rules for using technology for communication (Strawbridge, 2006). For example, an unwritten rule indicates that it is inappropriate to fire a person or breakup with a significant other through text messaging. Even though face-to-face meetings are considered preferable in situations that tend to generate emotion, such as making negative comments or providing bad news, (due to people's ability to send and receive a full

range of nonverbal messages), people seem much more likely to generate negative messages electronically because of the feeling of anonymity provided by technology. This sense of anonymity persists even though electronic messages can be passed along rapidly and eventually shared with a much greater audience than a verbal encounter. Table 3 includes examples and purposes of several communication skills that can be used effectively in a co-taught classroom (Conderman, Bresnahan, & Pedersen, 2008).

As noted in Table 3, open-ended questions are useful whenever a teacher genuinely desires to seek input from their partner. During initial efforts, questions such as: "I am interested in understanding your views on classroom management", "Could you tell me more about how you use technology?" or "What are your feelings about using hands-on activities?" open dialogue between teachers. Feeling questions such as: "How do you feel about that lesson?" and "What are your thoughts on how we can involve Joel more in classroom activities?" enlist the views of the co-teacher and therefore promote parity in the partnership. In contrast, closed questions are used to secure or confirm agreement, usually on factual issues.

I-messages, the sandwich technique, and the seed-planting technique are especially appropriate when co-teachers experience conflict. Instead of blaming or shaming their partner by saying, "You *should* work with all the students in the classroom," co-teachers can use an I message to openly state how the situation affects them. These messages can have a positive or negative tone, and their

> **In addition to adjusting one's style to honor the partner's needs, co-teachers need to use specific effective communication skills with their co-teacher.**

three parts can be stated in any order. The sandwich technique is typically used for sensitive issues that warrant immediate attention. In these statements, the meat or issue is conveyed between two other statements or pieces of bread, so the impact of the message is softened. The seed-planting technique is less direct and used only when the issue is not critical.

The paraphrase and summarization methods are used to check understanding of factual information. Using these methods, the listener checks his or her understanding of the content of the received message. Many times, partners assume they understand a message, but they actually have misinterpreted its meaning. Then, teachers are surprised and frustrated when the partner does not act in the manner they expected. Double-checking meanings and perceptions is critical for avoiding unnecessary conflict. In contrast, the response to affect method is used when the speaker has conveyed much emotion, and the listener wants to bond with his or her partner on an emotional level.

Finally, the word picture paints a visual image. If you notice that your co-teacher uses vivid language by speaking in pictures, consider using this method. Paralleling the communication style of your partner is one way to speak their language.

3) *Reflect on your motive for confronting.* Before confronting a partner, a co-teacher must first determine the personal motivation for a confrontation. Does the co-teacher possess a difference in values or opinions about interventions or curriculum? Is the conflict related to limited resources, time, responsibilities, or power? Does the co-teacher merely find a specific behavior of the partner annoying? If the later is correct, the co-teacher needs to de-termine if the partner's behavior is actually interfering with instruction or harming the partners' relationship. If the partner's behavior impacts co-teaching, the co-teacher must decide if the problem's interference is so significant that it must be addressed (Friend & Cook, 2007). A co-teacher who wants the partner's behavior altered or stopped may use direct confrontation. However, other methods such as negotiation, rational persuasion, and collaboration are often more effective (Truscott, Richardson, Cohen, Frank, & Palmeri, 2003) and less damaging to the partner relationship.

4) *Consider when and how to confront caringly your partner.* Co-teachers who have developed the ability to joke together and be at ease in each other's company are able to discuss concerns in a non-threatening and non-hostile manner (Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norland, Gardizi, & McDuffie, 2005). In a relationship built upon genuine trust and mutual respect, partners can introduce concerns as merely another topic of conversation. When co-teachers are beginning to develop their relationship, they should speak without blaming and accusing their partner. When a co-teacher initiates a discussion, it is important to accurately describe the partner's behavior in a factual and nonjudgmental manner. Concerns should be introduced merely as items affecting both co-teachers for which they need to brainstorm possible solutions.

Table 3: Examples of Communication Skills

Communication Skill	Purpose(s)	Example(s)
I-message	• To indicate ownership of one's feelings about an event • To indicate what you have observed, how you feel about the event, and the concrete effect that event has on you	I am really pleased when I see you working with all of the students in the class as now I can ask your input on each child. I am frustrated when you call on only the students with higher abilities because then I cannot assess the learning of other students in class.
Sandwich Technique	• To share a sensitive issue or concern (situated between two other statements) • To share an issue and invite collaboration	I realize how much care about Johann, and that is why I wanted to share this situation with you. The issue is that I saw him cheating on our quiz today. I am wondering how we can approach this issue.
Paraphrase	• To check the accuracy of the content of a conversation	So, you will follow up with the attendance secretary, and I will check with Cassandra's parents regarding her recent absences.
Summarization	• To highlight main points of a longer conversation or meeting	In summary, from our planning meeting today, we have decided to begin the new unit on Monday, use an anticipation guide to assess students' current knowledge of U. S. geography, and then pair students to begin the U. S. map activity.
Open-ended question	• To solicit someone's opinions, thoughts, or views	How do you feel about today's lesson? What are your thoughts about doing a role play together to get students interested in this topic? I am wondering how we can differentiate instruction next week.
Closed question	• To establish agreement on factual information or seek closure on details	Can we meet again Friday to co-plan for next week? Did you make the accommodations for Roberto's worksheet? Will you call Philip's parents to see if he will be returning tomorrow?
Seed Planting	• To indicate the need to visit with a parent or colleague at a later time. • This skill is used when the issue is not of critical concern.	I realize you are on your way out, but I noticed that you seemed a little quiet during co-teaching today. Could we visit about this when we have more time---how about tomorrow at lunch?
Response to Affect	• To empathize with someone • To check your perception of someone's feelings	You seemed rather frustrated and upset when Ron did not hand in his homework today.
Word Picture	• To communicate using an analogy, simile, or metaphor	Your ideas for that unit are out of this world! We make a dynamite co-teaching team! Our students are really blossoming with this new approach!

TECPlus

5) *Allocate time to develop the relationship.* A relationship between co-teachers, just as a marriage, requires time to grow strong (Dieker, 2001). In order for co-teachers to become effective partners, they must reserve time not only for lesson planning and development but also to nurture the relationship between co-teachers. Relationships of any depth take time. Even in the best circumstances, it still takes time to build the relationship and make it strong (Maxwell, 2004). If co-teachers are to be effective partners, they must know each other well, be able to anticipate the partner's response, and have an on-going interactive relationship.

Conclusion

Co-teaching allows equal partners to blend their expertise to support the learning of each student in the general education classroom. The potential of co-teaching, however, is compromised when co-teachers like Mr. Gillespie and Ms. Marcos do not honor the collaboration style of their partner. Co-teachers can blend their expertise by first openly discussing strengths they bring to the teaching situation. Similarly, they must acknowledge their preferred communication or collaboration style. Do they like being in charge? Are they energized by the social aspects of teaching and learning? Do they prefer a quiet and routine approach? Are they really into details? Being honest during early discussions provides the team with knowledge needed to honor each other's style and communicate in ways that support each other. Several informal research-based assessments can guide co-teachers in understanding the collaborative and communication needs of their partner. The challenge is to honor the partner's style by acting in ways that *they* prefer. Taking the time to assess each teacher's style and consciously making the effort to respect that style minimizes unnecessary teacher conflict and allows co-teachers to focus on the real reason for teaching, which is to challenge all students within an environment that respects diversity and individual integrity.

References

Alessandra, T. (2007). *The Platinum Rule*. Retrieved February 16, 2008, from: http://www.platinumrule.com/aboutpr.asp

Conderman, G., & Bresnahan, V. (2007). Co-teaching that works. *New Teacher Advocate.* Indianapolis, IN: Kappa Delta Pi.

Conderman, G., Bresnahan, V., & Pedersen, T. (2008). *Purposeful co-teaching: Real cases and effective strategies.* Thousand Oaks. CA: Corwin Press.

Conderman, G., Morin, J., & Stephens, J. T. (2005). Special education student teaching practices. *Preventing School Failure 49*(3), 5-10.

Conderman, G., & Stephens, J. T. (2000). Voices from the field: Reflections from beginning special educators. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 33* (1), 16-21.

Covey, S. R. (2004). *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. New York: Free Press.

Cramer, S. (2006). *The special educator's guide to collaboration*. Thousand Oaks. CA: Corwin Press.

Dettmer, P., Thurston, L., Knackendoffel, A., & Dyck, N. (2009). *Collaboration, consultation, and teamwork* (6th ed.). Columbus, OH: Pearson.

Dieker, L., & Barnett, C. A. (1996). Effective co-teaching. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 29*(1), 5-7.

Dieker, L. A. (2001). What are the characteristics of "effective" middle and high school co taught teams for students with disabilities? *Preventing School Failure, 46,* 14-23.

Dunn, R., & Dunn, K. (1978). *Teaching students through their individual learning styles*. Reston, VA: Reston Publishing.

Fattig, M. L., & Taylor, M. T. (2008). *Co-teaching in the differentiated classroom: Successful collaboration, lesson design, and classroom management, Grades 5-12*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Friend, M., & Cook, L. (2007). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals*. (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education Inc.

Gately, S., & Gately, F. (2001). Understanding co-teaching components. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 33*(4), 40-47.

Gregorc, A. F., & Ward, H. B. (1977). A new definition for individual: Implications for learning and teaching. *NASSP Bulletin, 61*, 20-26.

Halvorson, A. T., & Neary, T. (2009). *Building inclusive schools: Tools and strategies for success* (2nd ed). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

Hourcade, J. J., & Bauwens, J. (2003). *Cooperative teaching: Rebuilding and sharing the school house* (2nd ed.). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Kolb, D. A. (1976). *Learning-style inventory: Technical manual*. Boston: McBer & Co.

TECPlus

Mastropieri, M. A., Scruggs, T. E., Graetz, J., Norland, J., Gardizi, W., & McDurrie, K. (2005). Case studies in co-teaching in the content areas: Successes, failures, and challenges. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 40,* 260-270.

Maxwell, J. C. (2004). *Winning with people: Discover the people principles that work for you everytime.* Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

McCarthy, B. (1990). Using the 4MAT system to bring learning styles to schools. *Educational Leadership, 48*(2), 31-37.

Miscisin, M. (2007). *The true colors test*. Retrieved October 10, 2008, from http://www.positivelymary.com/

Miscisin, M. (2001). *Showing our true colors*. Santa Ana, CA: True Colors, Inc.

Murawski, W. W., & Dieker, L. A. (2004). Tips and strategies for co-teaching at the secondary level. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 36* (5), 52-58.

Murawski, W. W., & Dieker, L. A. (2008). 50 ways to keep your co-teacher: Strategies for before, during, and after co-teaching. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 40* (4), 40-48.

Myers, I. B. (1962). *The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator manual*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2002). *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Rice, D., & Zigmond, N. (2000). Co-teaching in secondary schools: Teacher reports of development in Australian and American classrooms. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 15,* 190-197.

Scruggs, T. E., Mastropieri, M., & McDuffie, K. (2007). Co-teaching in inclusive classrooms: A metasynthesis of qualitative research. *Exceptional Children, 73* (4), 392-416.

Strawbridge, M. (2006). *Netiquette: Internet etiquette in the age of the blog.* London: Software Reference Ltd.

Trent, J., & Cox, R. (2006). *Leading from your strengths*. Retrieved February 16, 2008, from http://leadingfromyourstrengths.com/

Truscott, S., Richardson, R., Cohen, C., Frank, A., & Palmeri, D. (2003). Does rational persuasion influence potential consultees? *Psychology in the Schools 40* (6), 627-640.

Villa, R. A., Thousand, J. S., & Nevin, A. I. (2008). *A guide to co-teaching: Practical tips for facilitating student learning* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Walther-Thomas, C. S. (1997). Co-teaching experiences: The benefits and problems that teachers and principals report over time. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 30*, 395-408.

About the Authors:

Greg Conderman is an Associate Professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL.

Sarah Johnston-Rodriguez is Assistant Professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL.

Paula Hartman is Assistant Professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL.

TECPlus