

Teaching Health Librarianship with a Very Large Team: Breaking the Borders of the One-Instructor Model

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Background

Teaching with a very large team differs from courses in which an instructor invites many guest speakers in that all team members are involved in the course from beginning to end, taking various roles including curriculum development, coordination, teaching, setting assignments, interacting with students, marking assignments and evaluating the course

While there are articles about small team teaching in the literature (Cruz and Zaragoza, George and Davis-Wiley), there are no examples of courses in health sciences librarianship taught by very large teams.

Goal

To evaluate the delivery of a one-semester graduate level course in Health Librarianship (LIS 520), as taught a team of eleven co-instructors, and to create best practices for teaching with very large teams in health sciences librarianship.

Methods

1. LIS 520 was taught from September to December 2011.
2. Eleven academic health librarians jointly created the curriculum and taught the course.
3. Students completed mid-point and final surveys with both Likert scale questions and open-ended questions.
4. Librarians responded to an evaluative survey in print or verbally,
5. Two librarians compiled survey results.
6. All librarians contributed to the creation of the best practices document.

Results – Evaluative

Student Evaluations:

Both the students and the librarians found this course to be a very positive experience. The greatest benefits for the students were that they were exposed to many practicing health librarians through the course and were able to benefit from the rich knowledge base that the team brought to the course.

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Results – Evaluative Continued

	Better	About the same
Mastery of Material Presented	4	3
Maintaining Student Interest in Class	5	2
Range of Learning Activity Types	4	3
Communication with Students	3	4

Figure 1: Student ratings of large team instructor performance when compared previous experience in other courses having 3 or fewer instructors.

Student Commentary: Positive

- 'learn from a broad knowledge base'
- 'variety of voices/input'
- 'teaching of topics by subject experts'
- 'best class I have taken'
- Also liked:
Practical hands-on exercises (some in class) and assignments which helped students learn
Small class size (7)

Figure 2: Student commentary on the things that they liked best about the large team taught course.

Student Commentary: Drawbacks

- "a danger of sections being disconnected"
- "not when it is well-taught like this class was"
- "if properly coordinated, no"
- "differences in the amount of material presented"
- "instructors in one session assumed familiarity (with material that had not previously been taught)"

Figure 3: Student commentary on whether or not they saw drawbacks to being instructed by a large team.

Instructor Evaluations:

For the librarians the primary benefits were the opportunity to undertake graduate level instruction without having to take responsibility for the entire course and the opportunity to learn both in enhanced subject knowledge and in teaching techniques. All of the librarians believe that there is value in team-teaching the course again and all would volunteer to be part of the teaching team again.

Instructor Feedback: Positive

- "not something that I would have done on my own"
- "more creative instruction because of different teaching styles and knowledge"
- "liked working with a partner"
- "liked teaching within my own profession"
- "liked having a coordinator to maintain quality and consistency"

Figure 4: Instructor commentary on the things that they liked most about teaching in a large team environment.

Instructor Feedback: Downsides and Surprises

- "don't get to know the students like you would if you were the only instructor"
- "surprised by the amount of time and labour required for marking"

Figure 5: Instructor commentary about the things that they liked least about teaching in a large team environment

Large team teaching does require a team-leader or coordinator to ensure smooth communication with academic administration and the students. Students were clearly concerned about consistency in grading.

Results – Best Practices

1. Ensure that one or more team members take on the role of coordinating team efforts, so that there is consistency and efficiency across the course.
2. Make one person the primary communications point for the students.
3. In advance, establish within the team how grading will be done. Ensure that the students know how consistency and fairness will be maintained in the assignment of grades.
4. Ensure that members of the teaching team have the opportunity to get to know each other. If team members do not have prior experience with each other, there may need to be some team building exercises in advance of the course.
5. Ensure that multiple methods of communication are encouraged and used within the teaching team.
6. Ensure that all members of the team have the opportunity to contribute to the development of the curriculum, including the assignments, so that all instructors have a broad understanding of the course and the workload required of the students.
7. Come to consensus on who will teach what, allowing team members to choose to teach either in their areas of expertise, or perhaps with another instructor in an area in which they would like to develop expertise.
8. Involve the instructors to the level that they can be/want to be involved. One of the benefits of a large team is that people can contribute more or less, depending upon their skills, knowledge, abilities and available time.
9. Build in multiple points of contact between the students and the various instructors, so that the students have the more opportunity to get to know the instructors better.
10. Ensure that all instructors place their teaching materials into a repository that is accessible by all, so that instructors can see what the students have already covered.
11. Allow the instructors to introduce their own teaching methods and styles to take advantage of the breadth of teaching skill that the team members bring to the course.
12. Incorporate a de-briefing session so that instructors can reflect upon the team's work and offer suggestions for improvement.
13. Have fun and find ways for the students to have fun.

Conclusions

This study found benefits in teaching health librarianship using a large integrated team of practicing librarians.

- Benefits to students included exposure to a variety of practicing health librarians and their collective broad knowledge base.
- Benefits to librarians included being able to teach at the graduate level without taking on a whole course and being able to learn through teaching with colleagues.

References

Cruz, Barbara C. and Zaragoza N. Team Teaching in Teacher Education: Intra-College Partnerships, TEQ, Spring 1998, p. 53 – 62.
George, M A and Davis-Wiley P. Team Teaching a Graduate Course. *Coll Teach*, [Internet]. 2000, Spring [cited 22 May, 2012] Vol. 48, Issue 2, p 75-81. Available from JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27558993>.