exploring collaborative teaching and learning models in a university drama literature classroom

scholarship of teaching and learning research project

purpose
This study examines the effects of a co-operative instruction model (between professor and TA) and performance-based group work on student attitudes towards learning in a one-semester, honours-level undergraduate Canadian drama literature course (32 students).

objectives
The goal of this study is to explore the extent to which 1) a consistent team-teaching model and 2) regular group-focused activities and assignments have a positive effect on student motivation and attitudes towards collaborative teaching and learning models.

rationale
The teaching and learning in this course attempts to foster critical thinking as a group and shared responsibility in decision-making among all group members. Because collaboration and co-authorship are key issues in understanding how dramatic performance is negotiated and carried out, it is thought that a collaborative instructional mode, in which the professor and TA share responsibilities, as well as collaborative class activities and assignments, are effective models for cooperative interaction and learning.

method
This study employed a mixed-method design, which included quantitative measures (pre-test and post-test surveys) and qualitative measures (reflective journals). Respondents completed in-class surveys in January and April 2009, and in-class reflective journals in March and April 2009, on their attitudes towards collaboration in teaching and learning.

reflective journal questions
Q1. At the beginning of the term the researchers described their study about collaborative learning in the university drama classroom. In relation to your experiences so far this semester, how would you describe collaborative learning?
Q2. What specific characteristics of the performance group work in this class do you find most useful in your learning and development? Are there any characteristics of the group work that you would like to see more of in the future?
Q3. What do you feel are the three most important outcomes or changes you notice in yourself as a result of participating in the group work in class so far this semester?
Q4. a) What do you see as Kim’s role in the classroom? b) What do you see as Allston’s role in the classroom?
Q5. What have you learned from observing the manner in which Kim and Allston have worked together in class so far this semester? Describe a specific moment or event that illustrates your response. (If you feel you haven’t been learning from this particular teaching approach, discuss why it has not been an effective approach for you.)
Q6. If you could choose one thing about the way the course is taught and implement it in your other classes, what would you choose?

results
1. collaborative instructional mode
Most students self-reported that team teaching made a positive difference in their learning experience. In April, 70.3% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “I am interested in taking future courses that incorporate team teaching models between TAs and professors.”

- Strongly Disagree: 11.3%
- Disagree: 10.7%
- Neutral: 16.0%
- Agree: 45.7%
- Strongly Agree: 72.5%

Mean = 3.74 on a 5-point scale (SD = 1.16)

2. collaborative performance work and discussion
Students reported enjoying high levels of participation through group discussion, performance, and “talk-back.” 14 of 25 students in March (15/26 in April) mentioned that the class environment increased comprehension, learning, and enjoyment. Students also reported showing more confidence and leadership skills, improved listening skills, and a greater willingness to learn from diverse perspectives. In April, 73% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “I was able to develop new skills and knowledge from other members in my group.”

opportunities and future work
1. diversity in approaches to teaching in the university classroom
While most students reported enjoying collaborative teaching and learning, some neutral and negative responses suggest the need for promoting diverse pedagogical approaches across English courses and programs.

“What I saw: a) An instructor b) An instructor c) What I would like to see: a) An instructor b) a teaching assistant”

“I enjoyed class and the different teaching strategy was interesting, but I would not want all of my courses to start being taught in this manner.”

2. defining the enhanced TA role
Many students reported that they regarded the TA as equal, or complementary, in authority, knowledge, and value for the class, but the wide range of descriptors of the TA and her duties suggests the need for developing a pedagogical language that more precisely defines the enhanced TA role for both faculty and students.

3. benefits beyond the classroom
A number of students reported improved interpersonal and teamwork skills whose value extends beyond the classroom. Future research may consider how collaboration in English courses will benefit students in achieving future goals.

acknowledgements and dissemination
This research was made possible by the Small Research Grants Program 2009. Thanks to Dean Rob Stanton, Dr. Jan Plug, Dr. Ken Meadows, Dr. Alan Weeden, and the Research on Teaching and Learning (Roth) community for their support.

Parts of this research have been presented at the Opportunities and New Directions: A Research Conference on Teaching and Learning, University of Waterloo (06 May 2009), and at the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Annual Conference, University of New Brunswick (17 – 20 June 2009).

references

Dr. Kim Solga (Dept. of English, Western),
Dr. Jennifer Boman (Dept. of Psychology, King’s College),
Dr. Alan Paulson (Dept. of English, Western)