20 Ways to . . .

Robin Lock, Associate Editor

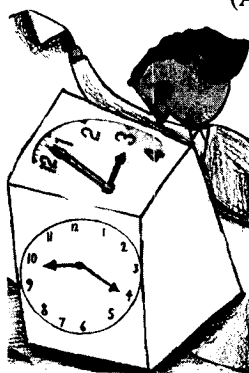# Strengthen Your Coteaching Relationship

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Coteaching benefits both students and teachers, and the benefits grow as coteaching relationships mature (Hourcade & Bauwens, 2003; Magiera et al., 2006; Walther-Thomas, 1997). Effective coteaching relationships often evolve in stages (Gately & Gately, 2000), and coteachers can take steps to help their relationships flourish (Cramer, 2006). Drawing on the practices of successful coteaching teams, this article offers research-supported strategies that can be used to cultivate coteaching relationships.

Planning and Instruction

1 **Set aside large blocks of time for planning.** Veteran coteachers recognize that effective planning is a prerequisite for successful coteaching (Arguelles, Hughes, & Schumm, 2000); the hard part is finding enough time for collaborative planning (Hackman & Berry, 2000). With only one shared preparatory period a week, most teachers are limited to tinkering with last year's plans, trying to retrofit them to this year's students. However, with an uninterrupted block of 2 to 3 hours each month, teachers can build new units of standards-based, differentiated lessons. To create collaborative planning time, some districts now hire substitute teachers: one replaces the special education partner for the day, and the other floats to substitute for the general education partners, allowing each coteaching pair to work in depth for up to half a day.

2 **Adapt planning tools to suit your needs.** The planning pyramid introduced by Schumm, Vaughn, and Harris (1997) helps coteachers identify and communicate their instructional priorities for all students. The planning process and record-keeping form developed by Hawbaker, Balong, Buckwalter, and Runyon (2001) focuses collaborative planning on the skills and concepts students are most likely to find difficult. After you have tried out a planning tool once or twice, adapt it to reflect your own planning styles and to suit your students' needs.

3 **Lobby for instructional materials that support coteaching.** As your coteaching relationship grows, so does your ability to differentiate instruction. Kame'enui and Simmons (1999) maintain that just as a ramp provides access to the school building for students with physical disabilities, differentiated instructional materials provide access to the general education curriculum for students with cognitive disabilities. However, just as a standard ramp will not fit all buildings, different students need different materials and adaptations. Help your supervisors understand that to provide the content and format adaptations that allow your students to progress in the general education curriculum (Lenz & Schumaker, 1999) and that meet the principle of feasibility (Schumm, 1999), you depend on ready access to high-quality books, software, manipulatives, and other supplies. Recommend that your school's guidelines for ordering instructional materials be expanded to include provisions for the additional needs of inclusive classes.

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4 **Try new models of coteaching.** Because coteaching is relatively new approach that has grown rapidly (Friend & Cook, 2007), not all teachers have had the benefit of professional development to help them find the coteaching models best suited to their situations. As a result, in some coteaching arrangements, the special education partner is relegated to the role of an instructional assistant. Teachers who find that their professional knowledge and skills are not being used fully should look into different models for coteaching. There are, among others, models designed for whole-group instruction, instruction for two groups, and instruction for multiple groups; models that work best when one or two students have significant disabilities; and models to use when one of the teachers has expertise in the content area and the other has expertise in learning strategies (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1997; Dieker, 2007; Friend & Cook, 2007). Experiment with different models and adapt them to suit your students' needs and your teaching styles.

5 **Use your time strategically.** Teacher time is the most precious resource in any classroom; coteaching allows you to make the best use of it. Veteran coteachers recognize that some lessons just do not need two teachers at all times (Walsh & Jones, 2004). Once you both know how the other conducts certain routines or responds to emerging problems, you can feel confident about leaving one teacher in charge while the other attends to coteaching tasks outside of the classroom. While one person leads the vocabulary preview or monitors the group activity, the other can be updating URLs for this year's version of last year's Webquest or creating a study guide for the new science unit.

6 **Reexamine the layout of your classroom to be sure it continues to be well-suited to your evolving coteaching practices.** The physical arrangements that are typical of traditional classroom instruction do not work very well in cotaught inclusive classes (Peterson & Hittie, 2003). Your classroom layout should change as your early, perhaps tentative, coteaching efforts evolve and you begin to make regular use of more robust models. For example, if you do lots of alternate or parallel teaching, make sure furniture is arranged to cut down on distractions (e.g., separating areas with bookcases on wheels). If you make frequent use of station teaching, arrange the furniture to promote an efficient traffic flow, so transition times can be kept to a minimum. Be sure that frequently used supplies are stored in places you can access without creating a distraction for your coteacher, and designate a convenient spot to leave notes and materials for each other.

Assessment

7 **Give and get feedback, twice as fast.** Wiggins (2006) maintains that classroom assessments are the most powerful tool teachers have. Coteachers can maximize that power by using brief assessments during class to identify who is learning what. Give students quarter sheets of paper and 3 minutes to complete a concept map or categorizing grid using a word bank, or to answer a question about a concept you are exploring. While one teacher moves on to the next activity, the other quickly reviews the feedback. If the students' responses indicate confusion or misunderstanding, the two teachers can "strike while the iron is hot" and review or reteach before misconceptions take root. In providing feedback about student learning, these brief assessments also offer indirect feedback on the effectiveness of different instructional strategies you and your coteacher are using. Over time, you may be able to determine, for example, when whole-group instruction is more effective for your students than small-group instruction, or when explicit teaching yields better results than indirect approaches.

8 **Clarify your understanding of each other's grading expectations.** At the beginning of a new unit, it helps to develop a scoring rubric cooperatively and then use it to score a few papers together, using the process as a way to communicate to each other your expectations for student performance. Then the general education teacher, who may have used this assignment with previous classes, might grade the entire set of papers first before asking the special educator to review and offer feedback on all the papers, not just on those of students with individualized education programs. You might split the next set, each grading half of the papers and asking the other to review them before grades are finalized. For a thoughtful discussion of the challenges of grading students in inclusive settings, see Salend and Duhaney (2002).

9 **Experiment with ways to share responsibility for grading.** Sharing the burdens of grading is one of the pleasures of coteaching. Some partners alternate, each grading the whole set for every other assignment; others split the set of papers in half. Effective coteachers have a sense of shared responsibility for all students, so both partners are willing and able to grade any student's work. This flexibility is a hallmark of excellence in coteaching (Arguelles et al., 2000; Magiera et al., 2006).

Enhancing Your Partnership

10 **Recognize the little things that can mean a lot.** Are both teachers' names on the classroom door? On report cards? Do both teachers have adult-sized desks and chairs? According to Friend and Cook (2007), these "parity signals . . . communicate to students and parents, as well as remind each (co-teacher), that co-teaching is about a true partnership" (p. 131).

11 **Pay attention to parity.** The absence of parity signals may indicate larger problems. When one teacher hesitates to teach from the front of the room and instead hovers along the margins or asks permission to use instructional materials stored on the other teacher's desk, it is evident to all observers, including students, that the coteaching relationship is not a partnership between equals. Keefe, Moore, and Duff found that "a major barrier to successful co-teaching resulted from the lack of parity felt between general education and special education teachers" (2004, p. 37).

12 **Acknowledge problems early and honestly.** Despite its well-documented advantages, Duke (2004) reminds us, "Collaboration is not without struggle and confusion" (p. 208). Unfortunately, coteachers are often quick to smooth over misunderstandings. Lieberman and Miller (1999) note that teachers "often become masters at denying conflict and dismissing any disagreements as a 'communications problem'" (p. 24), but problems are much more manageable if coteachers deal with them promptly and candidly. If you sense a strain, consider saying, "I have a feeling there's something on your mind. Would you like to talk it over?"

13 **Address conflicts in a manner that is comfortable for both of you.** Most of us have developed preferred ways of responding to conflict (Kelker, 2000),

even if we do not recognize them as such. For example, one teacher may assume that the time and place to discuss a problem is at the weekly planning meeting, but the other may not want to wait that long. If one partner mentions a concern at the end of the period, as both teachers head off to their next assignments, the other may be left with some worry and no way to dispel it. As your coteaching relationship matures, so will your awareness of your partner's preferred style, and you can look for ways to address problems that work for both of you.

14 **Learn to let it go.** Cramer (2006) maintains that "Teachers who make a commitment to a collaborative effort must subsume their personal preferences to the total requirements of the task" (p. 13). This is not to say you should adopt a conflict resolution style rooted in avoidance or accommodation—that inevitably would limit your ability to function as a student advocate. However, there will be times when you and your coteaching partner have different ideas about the best approach to a lesson. Wisdom lies in recognizing those times when something other than your preferred approach will probably work just as well.

Extending Your Reach

15 **Attend a professional development workshop together.** The fast pace in most inclusive classrooms can leave teachers feeling as if they do not have enough time to think, much less deliberate together about important educational issues. Try getting away from the building for a professional development day together. You will return with a partner who can offer support and feedback as you begin to use the ideas you gained at the conference, and with a stronger sense of your identity as a team. Although it is important for new teams to attend workshops on coteaching and collaboration together (Magiera et al., 2006), experienced teams should consider going to conferences on the content areas they teach together. Mason, Thormann, O'Connell, and Behrmann (2004) recommend that special education teachers delve into the topics that are addressed by the professional development conferences, journals, and Web sites of their general education colleagues.
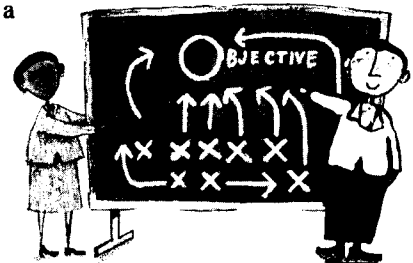
16 **Model collaborative skills.** The collaborative skills demonstrated by effective coteachers are the same ones students will need to be successful as

adults. Changes in society, and especially in the world of work (e.g., business, industry, human services, telecommunication, and health care), have resulted in an increased need for collaboration (Friend & Cook, 2007). Although students seldom have the highly developed interpersonal skills needed for effective collaboration, such skills can be taught (Snowman & Biehler, 2006). Coteachers can take deliberate steps to make the usually covert processes involved in collaborative problem-solving obvious to their students. For example, they can explain how they both contributed ideas and shared the work in planning a new unit, or how they arrived at a compromise about a schedule change.

17 **Volunteer to serve as mentors to new coteaching pairs.** Explaining your beliefs and practices related to collaboration can help you think more critically about the coteaching decisions you make. Questions from beginning coteachers and from student teachers can lead you to look at your coteaching relationship with fresh eyes, seeing it as other teachers might. As you explain how you share various responsibilities or why you use certain teaching models, you may reexamine your assumptions and discover new ways to work together. Cramer (2006) suggests online networks where teachers can provide feedback on a range of issues, including the interpersonal challenges that can be part of any collaborative experience. Inviting new coteachers to be part of the network can help them and can also help you.

Maintaining Perspective

18 **Create a mission statement.** Keefe and colleagues (2004) assert that "a successful partnership must include . . . a vision that will sustain you through the difficult times" (p. 38). If you have ever helped write a mission statement for your school or community organization, you know that the experience can be a powerful way to build a shared vision and a feeling of community. A good mission statement reminds coteachers of their common purpose and can provide direction for decision-making. An online program such as the one available for free at http://www.franklincovey.com/missionbuilder/ can help you and your coteacher write a mission statement for your class.

19 **Honor your sense of humor.** The teachers interviewed by Stivers, Lavoie, Perner, and Kinn (2003) put a sense of humor near the top of their list of traits needed for effective coteaching. They knew intuitively what business management experts have established through research: humor enhances team building, encourages communication, and stimulates creativity (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995).

20 **Remember: It is not a marriage.** Although coteachers sometimes compare their relationships to marriage, the analogy is not very helpful. It may promote unrealistic expectations about how coteachers should work together. In fact, your coteacher may not be someone with whom you would choose to have a close personal relationship, but you can still build an effective professional relationship. Mastropieri et al. (2005) found that teachers who did not volunteer to work together nevertheless became effective partners. Of course, it is great fun when you and your coteacher are friends as well as colleagues, but there may be even greater satisfaction in maintaining a good working relationship with someone with whom you have little in common other than a commitment to your shared students.

About the Author

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