

Chapter # 3

REFLECTING ON A PALAR CO-TEACHING JOURNEY IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Co-teaching at universities encourages student participation, opens chances for feedback, and promotes critical thinking. Co-teaching is a model that involves two or more professionals working together to plan, instruct, and monitor progress of a heterogenous or blended group of students in and outside the classroom, to achieve learning objectives. The authors – lecturers in teacher education at a university of technology – embarked on PALAR (participatory action learning research) in planning, instruction, and assessment, by working together as team partners in a process that stretched over more than two years. In this chapter we reflect on our collaboration. The process involved continuous action learning through experience, enhanced by co-reflection and critical questioning; furthermore, we undertook intentional action research with the primary goal of improving practice through successive cycles of plan–act–evaluate–reflect, and which lead to practice modification. We found that participating, collaborating, building relationships, communicating, and trusting, and the transformational nature of PALAR, are crucial to the process of enhancing learning. The findings imply that PALAR can provide lecturers with a rich learning experience. This chapter adds to the body of knowledge by demonstrating how the PALAR approach can be used in co-teaching for teacher education.

Keywords: co-teaching, PALAR, collaboration, teacher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Universities still socialise lecturers with extensive teaching knowledge, skills, experience, and practices that are relevant to the traditional one-teacher-per-classroom mode of teaching. Despite research and teaching practice finding that collaboration in higher education institutions is effective, lecturers often work in isolation, in self-contained or departmentalised lecture halls, with one lecturer per classroom working independently. Because lecturers are still prone to solo teaching, co-teaching as an instructional method is an important concern for university lecturers. Co-teaching may be difficult for lecturers who are accustomed to working in isolation, because they must now share the teaching space and transition from an individual to a collaborative model of accountability and practice (Scantlebury, Gallo-Fox, & Wassell, 2008). Moreover, co-teaching at universities has not always been met with enthusiasm, and there has been uncertainty about the most effective approach, resulting in lecturers facing obstacles to successful collaboration (Pratt, 2014; Lenong, 2022). Professionals or lecturers may occasionally take on co-teaching responsibilities but encounter difficulties putting co-teaching ideas or models into practice or applying them in their teaching and learning environment (Härkki, Vartiainen, Seitamaa-Hakkarainen, & Hakkarainen, 2021).

Co-teaching was introduced in schools as an inclusive educational method that allowed general and special education teachers to collaborate to improve learning and meet

the needs of all students (Cook & Friend, 1995). It was also introduced in higher education institutions in various domains (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2010; Jeannin & Sing, 2018; Rabin, 2020; Lenong, 2022). Friend (2008) proposes that the word co-teaching should not be defined by the discipline, the type of training of the participants, or the composition of the team. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have looked into co-teaching in higher education (Bacharach et al., 2010; Jeannin & Sing, 2018; Rabin, 2020); however, the reality is that studies have not succeeded in breaking down the resistance to or uncertainties about co-teaching, or addressed the fear of being observed by other lecturers and issues related to the unequal relationships of participants, in order to achieve a common co-teaching goal in the teacher education perspective.

Nunes (2018) confirms that lecturers or other professionals may experience difficulties implementing co-teaching. As a result, for co-teaching to be effective, it must be understood, lecturers must be sure about its implementation, and they should have a positive attitude. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to report on how PALAR (participatory action learning action research) can be used to build trust and equal relationships while overcoming barriers to co-teaching.

The chapter reports on the action learning and critical reflection that were the main factors in the co-teaching approach of this study. The chapter begins with a summary of the theory that drove the research and practical application of PALAR in teacher education at the university of technology involved. It will conclude by emphasising the importance of PALAR in building trust and equal relationships in co-teaching classrooms, to improve student learning. Conclusions will be drawn from the study and recommendations will be made for future research.

2. NATURE OF CO-TEACHING

Co-teaching differs from traditional instructional models in which the lecturer is the sole distributor of knowledge and skills. Cooperative teaching, as defined by Friend (2015), is a merger between general and special educators teaching in a classroom to provide educational curriculum to all students. The term cooperative teaching was later shortened to co-teaching by Cook and Friend (1995). Co-teaching was developed to allow general and special education teachers to interact to improve learning and meet the needs of all students (Cook & Friend, 1995). Initially, co-teaching was offered as a method of supporting children with disabilities in schools (King-Sears, Jenkins, & Brawand, 2020). Co-teaching was first used in schools as an inclusive education method, though it is now being used in higher education too, in heterogenous or blended groups (Bacharach et al., 2010; Jeannin & Sing, 2018; Rabin, 2020).

Teacher education has been implementing the technique of co-teaching since the early 1980s (Badiali & Titus, 2010). Hence, for this chapter, co-teaching, also called collaborative teaching or team-teaching, is a method of instruction that brings together two or more teachers of equal status to create a learning community with shared planning, instruction, and student assessment. Co-teaching can involve a team of department or faculty members, specialists from outside the university, guest speakers, and students – or other arrangements according to how collaboration is determined (Richards, Lawless Frank, Sableski, & Arnold, 2016).

Co-teaching can take different approaches, depending on the instructional needs of students and the task to be presented (Jeannin & Sing, 2018). These approaches include parallel teaching, alternative teaching, team teaching, one teaches one assists, and

alternative teaching. Most definitions of the concept include ideas of collective participation, shared vision, and team reflection (Fluijt, Bakker, & Struyf, 2016).

Ferguson and Wilson (2011) argue that co-teaching enhances lecturer expertise by encouraging lecturers to learn, reflect, change, and give students the chance to learn with effective instructional approaches and alignment of views, values, and teaching. Co-teaching allows for radical care, which has facilitated the development of opportunities for reciprocity in the study of power, identity politics, oppression, privilege, and action (Roland & Jones, 2020). According to Krammer, Gastager, Lisa, Gasteiger-Klicpera, and Rossmann (2018), co-teaching has gained in popularity in recent years, because collaborative teaching can provide differentiated, high-quality instruction that considers all students' needs. This is necessary because students differ significantly in terms of knowledge, abilities, and learning performance. Additionally, Minett-Smith and Davis (2019) report that it leads to improved staff and student satisfaction, which results in staff retention.

Most of the research on co-teaching at the university level has found it to be beneficial to both students and faculty (Hanusch, Obijiofor, & Volcic, 2009; Carpenter, Kerkhoff, & Wang, 2022). Carpenter et al. (2022) state that collaboration creates a richer learning environment and aids teachers to develop practices that support student learning. Co-teaching provides a solid basis for developing quality teaching abilities, cultivating connections, and collaborating for successful inclusive practice during first-year teaching experiences and beyond (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2007; Pettit, 2017). To effectively collaborate or co-teach subjects and work together to satisfy the needs of a variety of students, teaching has become reliant on collective knowledge and the sharing of a wealth of diverse perspectives by lecturers (Majola, 2019; Nunes, 2018). An additional benefit, according to Minett-Smith and Davis (2019), is that it increases staff and student happiness, leading to staff retention. Co-teaching offers an ideal context for learning by providing a zone of proximal development for students and providing ground to lecturers to develop teaching (Roth, Robin, & Zimmermann, 2002).

Bacharach, Heck, and Dahlberg (2008) report that including co-teaching in teacher preparation programmes is a viable strategy for building collaborative abilities, improving classroom instruction, promoting professional growth, and developing student communication skills. During teaching practicum, mentor teachers usually work with one student teacher for several weeks. During student teaching, first-year teaching experiences, and beyond, co-teaching provides a strong foundation for developing quality teaching abilities, and cogenerating connections and collaboration (Bacharach et al., 2008; Pettit, 2017; Lenong, 2022). Co-teaching is an instructional method that needs to be understood to be implemented effectively.

2.1. Principles of Co-teaching

The following principles, as explained by Friend (2016), contribute to co-teaching: mutual respect, mutual goals, shared accountability, and shared resources. The other elements partners must agree on are that they must have common goals and share a belief system, they bring different knowledge, skills, and resources and, thus, learn from each other (Lock, Clancy, Lisella, Rosenau, Ferreira, & Rainsbury, 2016). They must respect opposing viewpoints and thereby demonstrate parity.

2.2. Pitfalls of Co-teaching

The difficulties of incorporating co-teaching as an instructional method need to be addressed. Factors that may bring about difficulties in co-teaching may be external or

internal. Internal factors can be attributed to lecturers' attitudes, their feelings of confidence, fear of failure, and their coping mechanisms (Härkki et al., 2021). Though it has grown in popularity, there is still a lack of knowledge, and a lack of skill in relation to organising co-teaching (Sundqvist, Björk-Åman, & Ström, 2021). Lecturers might also find it difficult to switch from solo teaching to co-teaching (Krammer et al., 2018). Moreover, lecturers may have a fear of being observed by colleagues in the classroom (Scantlebury et al., 2008; Zang & Feng, 2020).

External factors that affect co-teaching are a shortage of adequate training, insufficient administrative support, a mismatch between co-teachers, and difficulties in establishing parity (Krammer et al., 2018). In addition, Sundqvist et al. (2021) report the following challenges: differences in knowledge base, expectations, and goals, conflicting goals, lack of time, and difficulties relating to power. These pitfalls might impede the smooth implementation of co-teaching at universities. Additionally, problems may arise when behind-the-scenes co-planning is done without participants having the necessary knowledge of best practices (Cooley, 2021). According to Drescher and Chang (2022), universities might not be equipped to handle the regulatory adjustments necessary to accommodate new teaching models, such as assessment systems, the effect on promotion or tenure, and the ability to schedule classes to accommodate the needs of two professors rather than one. Hussin and Hamdan (2016) suggest that a poor collaborative culture and a lack of administrative support are significant barriers that professionals face. Steele, Cook and, Ok (2021) identified the following drawbacks of co-teaching: co-teaching is time consuming, increases costs, causes conflicts between faculties, and involves financial, logistical, ideological, and social issues.

3. PARTICIPATORY ACTION LEARNING ACTION RESEARCH

Zuber-Skerritt (2011, p. 2) defines PALAR as a "synthesis of conceptions of action learning (AL) + action research (AR) + participatory action research (PAR) that develop in the PALAR paradigm in theory and practice (praxis)". PALAR is used for collaborative, critical inquiry, performed by academics themselves in their own teaching practice, to investigate student learning challenges and curriculum problems in higher education (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). PALAR ensures that critical reflection on learning is strengthened by participatory, democratic, mutual relationships, which have the aim of achieving a common goal (Zuber-Skerritt, Wood, & Louw, 2015.).

The four recurring stages of PALAR (plan–act–observe/evaluate–reflect) lead to a better knowledge of participants' changing practice and encourage critical reflection. These four cyclical stages help researchers to identify the requirements of all participants in a collaborative manner. The optimal plan of action is determined and implemented based on the needs that were identified.

The three Rs of PALAR as described by Kearney, Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013) – relationship, reflection, and recognition – can be used as a guide when employing this approach. These three aspects allow a truly participatory approach to knowledge generation and tangible social and educational improvements (Kearney et al., 2013).

The first part of PALAR, which is action learning (AL) is a cyclical learning process that takes place in small groups of people who share a common interest in solving real-world problems (Hurst & Marquardt, 2019; Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). The second part of PALAR is action research (AR), which aims to modify practices, people's understandings of their practices, and the contexts in which they practice (Kemmis, 2009). Conducting action research with a PALAR approach has the benefit of encouraging participants to

reflect critically on current knowledge and existing practice, before they adjust and improve their practices, as needed (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). PALAR leads to communication, lifelong learning and transformational change on both personal and professional levels (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015).

PALAR, as explained above, was an excellent starting point for this study, and enabled us to reflect on our journey of co-teaching at a university. Various creative activities were launched along the PALAR journey, which are elaborated on in the next sections.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in a four-year university-based teacher education programme in South Africa, with the aim of reflecting on a PALAR co-teaching journey. The chapter is driven by PALAR as an approach, philosophy, paradigm, methodology and a theory of learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). PALAR is democratic, and it permitted co-researchers learn from one another as they shared their views on solving the challenge that had been identified. PALAR encouraged collaboration, teamwork, and participation (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). The four recurring stages of PALAR, as explained above (plan–act–observe/evaluate–reflect) were followed. The study followed a qualitative approach, based on careful consideration of the principles of PALAR. Data was collected through meetings and workshops, by means of participants' written reflections and information gathered with a free interview schedule.

The meetings were held quarterly to reflect on how to improve knowledge and skills. Two workshops were presented. In this study, the co-researchers (we) were active interveners who helped one another. The four lecturers who worked collaboratively, participated in the study, and were involved in co-teaching lessons, which served as the research context. Permission to record discussions was granted. The institution granted ethical clearance, and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. We critically reflected and reported on our journey of co-teaching. Data were collected using virtual and audio recording devices and were transcribed into text for analysis. The data were analysed thematically throughout all the cycles (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The team teaching coded and recorded the data as individual members and came to a mutual agreement for the final themes. The researchers (we) collectively described themes and coding relationship via group discussions. We validated the findings to ensure that the researchers' (our) conclusions were correct.

Through PALAR, we were given the opportunity to think and act critically, so that we could become lifelong action learners and cooperate effectively with others to achieve personal and communal learning goals. In the planning stage, we started by identifying problems relating to implementing co-teaching effectively in the Education III module. We completed a needs analysis and agreed on the following: we had vast knowledge and experience of teaching the content, and we were interested in co-teaching. Furthermore, we all attended regular meetings and we were familiar with delivery of content and assessment methods. It was important to motivate each other, and regular meetings helped us to be task oriented and increased our enthusiasm.

Lecturers were interested in participating (P), working together on solving the problem affecting teaching and learning, learning from experience (AL) and engaging in a systematic inquiry (AR). The skills, knowledge, and experience of the students in the classroom were valued as assets in the course of a practical professional development programme, because they share knowledge and link learning to the settings of teaching

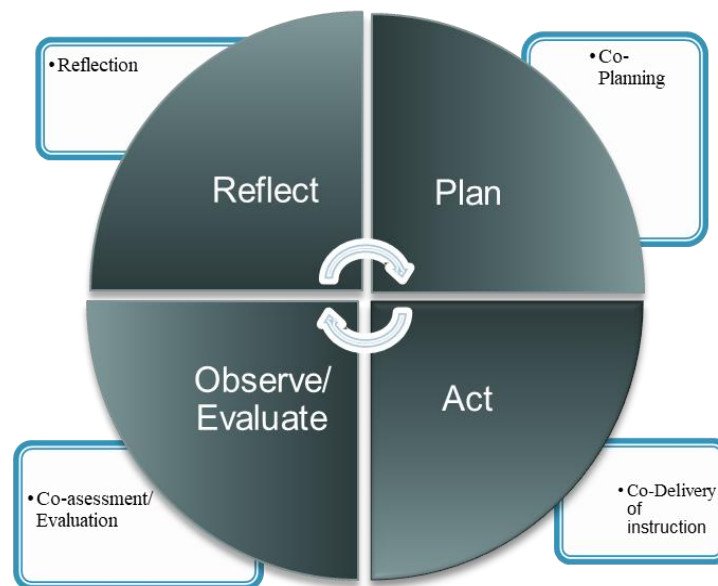
(Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). However, we also realised our own lack of knowledge during co-teaching, which resulted in a workshop that touched on defining how co-teaching should be implemented, and the different approaches and principles of co-teaching. We produced and shared knowledge, problems, ideals, and fears, and sought out opposing viewpoints.

We agreed to complete the allocated task, which involved designing slides and compiling test and examination question papers; we were also involved in collaborative marking. We started with parallel teaching, which meant that each lecturer taught their own class, though planning and assessment was done collaboratively. We were all expected to reflect on our planning, delivery of content and assessment procedures.

After learning about it, we experienced co-teaching a lesson in one sitting. The agreement was that all of us would be present in the class, and the lecturers who had been allocated to co-teach the topic, would do so. This meant that our co-teaching involved more than two professionals being in the classroom. At the end of the lesson, all the lecturers contributed to the lesson; we reflected on how co-teaching had been implemented and how it could be improved. To complete these learning pathways, we were assigned specific tasks and had to provide evidence during meetings. We discovered that we had to learn more about co-teaching and identify requirements for further action, especially in planning and delivery of a lesson. The focus was on what can we do to improve co-teaching.

A new cycle of (re-)plan-act-evaluate-reflect took place. The learning pathways were designed to be implemented over a three-year period, to allow for personal growth and skill gain. The meetings took place quarterly to reflect on improving our knowledge and skills.

Figure 1.
PALAR and co-teaching stages.



In conceptualising the figure, the PALAR inner cyclical learning process is the driving force of co-teaching. Action learning and critical reflection were the main factors in the co-teaching approach. Co-planning, co-delivery of instruction and co-assessment are the

important stages of co-teaching that are intertwined in PALAR. The model suggests that, in the three stages of co-teaching, co-reflection needs to be incorporated. The approach shows intentional action research with the primary objective of improving practice through successive cycles that each consisted of plan–act–evaluate–reflect, and involve continuous action learning through experience, which need to be enhanced by co-reflection and critical questioning.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter reports on how PALAR can be used to build trust and equal relationships while overcoming co-teaching barriers. The mutual learning process created new ways of knowing and understanding co-teaching. During each cycle, the three critical components – relationship, reflection, and recognition of the PALAR process – were demonstrated. The findings of the experiences and critical reflections of the lecturers are reported below according to themes.

5.1. Interpersonal relationship development and trust

The findings show that, to build a positive collaborative working environment, good interpersonal relationships must be built. We focused on relationship building to kick off the planning phase. Our collaboration was guided by trust, love, and mutual respect. For co-teaching relationships to develop, according to Roland and Jones (2020), co-teaching needs to occur naturally or evolve in a healthy manner – they should not be superficial. A good working relationship is important in co-teaching. Respect and trust are essential elements of collaboration. This view was demonstrated by the participants in the following comments:

Lecturer 1: Working as an educator tends to expose one to a lot of different people, whom through their own separated experiences possess in them different values, standards, and norms.

Lecturer 2: The relationships I've gradually developed... my interpersonal relationship with them became stronger seeing we had to assist each other as well as learn from one another.

Lecturer 3: It did build a good trust amongst lecturers.

Lecturer 4: Trust has also been influenced by the interpersonal relations that developed over the duration of the content delivery. I have had colleagues who seemed to not favour me much because of the age gap between myself and them, yet towards the end of the semester my relationship with them got better because of the work-related ideas that got to be shared during the semester and during the process of PALAR.

Lecturer 2: Collaboration ensured that I respected everyone during co-teaching.

Lecturer3: A perfect relationship is developed because of the we are free and comfortable with each other. We regard ourselves not only as colleagues but as friends as well.

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The comments show that co-teaching can improve teamwork, communication skills, and the ability to be thoughtful and open to new ideas from others, which leads to a good work ethic and trust. Co-teaching is viewed as a professional, marriage-like relationship or strong partnership, in which lecturers share instruction equally (Friend, 2015). The interpersonal relationship dimensions discovered in both the meetings and workshops included trust, inclusion, acceptance, love, hope and commitment.

5.2. Team facilitation and assessment boost confidence

The delivery of content and assessment were done in the form of station and parallel approaches to co-teaching, according to which each lecturer had to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the other during presentation. This boosted teamworking abilities and confidence to present before other colleagues. The lecturers had to work together and practice teamwork in order to achieve common goals or objectives of the module content. This is confirmed by the comments below.

Lecturer 2: My experience with facilitation improved through learning from my colleagues in the workplace, because of their years of experience working students of different cultures and generations, the colleagues had all the necessary skills I needed to assist me accordingly.

Lecturer 3: We planned lessons together, we shared resources, did preparation together and this made co-teaching effective and an enjoyable experience. I gained confidence.

Lecturer 1: I was not prepared to co-teach, particularly with experienced professionals, but the meetings and workshops allayed my concerns.

Lecturer 4: Working together makes difficult teaching process very simple and enjoyable.

These comments show that moral support fosters confidence in teaching, promotes a healthy work environment, and fosters a co-teaching environment in which perspectives can be shared (Kruger & Yorke, 2010). This finding is confirmed by Sharma and Cobb (2018), who argue that co-teaching allows for understanding of course content from various lived experiences, which inspires critical dialogue. Assessment and facilitation were a collaborative process that helped lecturers to gain knowledge and skills from one another while also promoting a healthy working environment that was free of fear of criticism by colleagues.

5.3. Pragmatic issues in co-teaching

The reflection sought information on the challenges experienced by lecturers in the co-teaching environment. The lecturers alluded to the following pitfalls of co-teaching: fear of collaborating, fear of teaching in front of others, and resistance to co-teaching. This reflection by a colleague summarises the views of many of the co-researchers:

Lecturer 2: I was scared to embark on co-teaching, I didn't want to teach in front or alongside my colleagues.

The finding was that lecturers found it difficult to move from solo teaching to sharing a classroom with a colleague; doing so could result in fear. Härkki et al. (2021) maintain that internal factors influence lecturers' attitudes, feelings of confidence, fear of failure, and coping mechanisms. These factors might impede the implementation or smooth running of co-teaching.

5.4. Lessons learnt from the co-teaching journey

We reflected on the lessons learnt from the PALAR co-teaching journey, to determine whether there are benefits to implementing co-teaching in teacher education. Lecturers reported that they appreciated the opportunity to collaborate and co-teach, as indicated in their reflections.

Lecturer 3: Co-teaching was not new to me... However, I did not know that this process and approaches or how to implement it.

Lecturer 1: I learnt through co-teaching that learners are all different and teachers must be mindful of their structures as they implement them in their respective classrooms. Teachers are also human beings with different attributes and values, co-teaching does not do away with such, but embraces it as it exposes to teachers, moments of preparation where they tend to learn more about how to treat each other not to embarrass themselves in front of their students.

Lecturer 4: I have learned that I had to be more open minded, accommodative, and willing to be a team player. I also learned that it needed a lot of emotional intelligence and patience, most importantly communication and respect.

Lecturer 2: I have learned that working together is good but if there is a mutual understanding and communication must be used to accommodate all parties involved.

These reflections clearly show that the team that was involved in the PALAR co-teaching journey benefited from the experience, and their participation resulted in a positive learning pathway.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from the data provided by the lecturers who participated in the PALAR co-teaching journey refer to internal factors, such as being afraid to collaborate, and fear of and resistance to co-teaching, which need to be managed. However, the lecturers generally agreed that they benefited from the experience, and it led to a positive learning environment. Subsequently, the PALAR path for co-teaching demonstrates the importance of participation, collaboration, relationship building, respect, communication and trust, and the transformational nature of the process for enhancing learning. There is, therefore, a need for co-teaching to be supported by all stakeholders, and the necessary training should be provided to lecturers. The findings imply that PALAR can be used to provide rich learning experiences for lecturers who are involved in co-teaching. PALAR provided lecturers with the opportunity to think and act critically, to become lifelong action learners

and to effectively collaborate with others to achieve personal and communal learning goals. As a result, by demonstrating how the PALAR approach can be used in co-teaching in teacher education may help lecturers to keep their students engaged and enhance effective content delivery with no recommended division of authority. Lecturers who are exposed to co-teaching are likely share a common goal; they will bring different knowledge and skills and will sharing a wealth of diverse perspectives on transmitting knowledge.

The chapter contributes to the literature by providing a view on co-teaching in teacher education through PALAR. Future research should incorporate perspectives from university-based management and other stakeholders, in order to probe co-teaching as an instructional method.

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