

Understanding Coteaching Components

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Initiatives to tighten eligibility requirements for special education, an increasing reliance on Section 504 (of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973) accommodations to serve students with disabilities, and inclusive schooling practices have increased the diversity of general education classrooms and highlight the need for all professionals in the schools to work together in collaborative partnerships (Wood, 1998). Coteaching between general and special educators has become a common method of service delivery (Reinhiller, 1996).

In this article, we describe the components of coteaching and give examples of what the teacher interactions of that component may resemble at each of the developmental stages of coteaching: the beginning stage, the compromising stage, and the collaborative stage. We also present the Coteaching Rating Scale (CIRS) and describe how teachers

and administrators can use it to develop appropriate objectives and directions for coteachers.

Eight Components of the Coteaching Relationship

Working with coteachers over the past decade has led us to delineate eight components of the coteaching classroom that contribute to the development of the collaborative learning environment (see Figure 1). We have observed that at each developmental stage, teachers may express these components somewhat differently. We have found that some teachers show uneven development across the components, working collaboratively in one component and at the beginning or compromising levels in other components. Identifying the developmental level for each component may help teachers set goals that will let them move more quickly from one developmental level to the next.

Interpersonal Communication

Effective interpersonal communication is essential in the coteaching relationship. Effective interpersonal communication entails the use of verbal, nonverbal, and social skills. At the beginning stage of coteaching, communication occurs in a guarded manner; teachers seek to correctly interpret verbal and nonverbal messages, with more or less success. There may be a clash of communication styles, lack of openness, and a

Figure 1. The Eight Components of the Coteaching Relationship

1. Interpersonal Communication
2. Physical Arrangement
3. Familiarity with the Curriculum
4. Curriculum Goals and Modifications
5. Instructional Planning
6. Instructional Presentation
7. Classroom Management
8. Assessment

level of dissatisfaction. At the beginning stage, teachers may voice dissatisfaction—or leave it unstated.

As the teachers become more effective at interpersonal communication, they move to the second stage of the developmental process. At this stage, interpersonal communication is more open and interactive. There is a marked increase in the amount of communication. Teachers also begin to give and take ideas, develop respect for a different communication style, increase their appreciation of the humor of some classroom situations, and increase their own use of humor in communication. The use of humor may mark the movement from the beginning stage to the compromising stage.

At the collaborative stage, coteachers begin to model effective communication

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What Is Coteaching?

Coteaching has been described in a variety of ways (Cook & Friend, 1995), but here we define it as *the collaboration between general and special education teachers for all of the teaching responsibilities of all students assigned to a classroom*. In a cotaught classroom, two teachers, general and special educators, work together to develop a differentiated curriculum that meets the needs of a diverse population of students. In a cotaught classroom, teachers share the planning, presentation, evaluation, and classroom management in an effort to enhance the learning environment for all students. In this way, the teachers can provide more integrated services for all students, regardless of learning needs.

Teachers involved in collaborative partnerships often report increased feelings of worth, renewal, partnership, and creativity (Friend & Cook, 1992). Yet teachers also voice dissatisfaction with the process, indicating poorly defined role descriptions, lack of clear expectations from administrators, and frustrations with implementation issues (Cook & Friend, 1998). We believe that the dissatisfaction that teachers experience with coteaching may be related to the developmental nature of this process (see box, “Stages of the Coteaching Process”). Teachers working in coteaching classrooms move through a developmental process from polite, and at times, fumbling interactions to truly collaborative relationships. As in any developmental process, teachers proceed through predictable stages in the coteaching relationship. Knowledge of the developmental stages of coteaching may diminish the frustration and expedite the movement toward a collaborative partnership.

styles for students. The teachers use more nonverbal communication, and they often develop nonverbal signals to communicate ideas. At the collaborative level, teachers become positive role models of effective communication skills for students. This is an added benefit because students with disabilities in the cotaught classroom often need to develop more effective social interaction skills. They can observe their coteacher models as they demon-

In the beginning stages of coteaching, there often appear to be “invisible walls” that separate the space of the two teachers.

Stages of the Coteaching Process

Coteaching is a developmental process. Like any developmental processes it has stages through which coteachers proceed. Through extensive coteaching experience, observations in coteaching classrooms, and conducting inservice training with coteachers over the past decade, we have identified three developmental stages in the coteaching process: the beginning stage, the compromise stage, and the collaborative stage. At each developmental stage in the coteaching process, teachers demonstrate varying degrees of interaction and collaboration.

Beginning Stage	Guarded, careful communication
Compromising Stage	Give and take communication, with a sense of having to “give up” to “get”
Collaborating Stage	Open communication and interaction, mutual admiration

Differing Timetables for Collaboration. Participants in the coteaching process may proceed through the stages quickly or slowly. In some instances, teachers will “click” and begin to collaborate after just a few short weeks. In other instances, they will proceed more slowly, with teachers struggling to communicate and work together. For example, one of the coauthors was recently assigned to work with a new staff member to the school. Both coteachers reported that a collaborative partnership developed within the first 6 weeks of the school year. We have talked to a number of other teachers who state that it has taken much longer to develop such a collaborative partnership. In fact, one teacher remarked that it took as long as 2 years to reach the collaborative stage.

Consultation Readiness. The notion of stages in collaboration is not new. Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb, and Nevin (1994) suggested six stages of consultation readiness:

- No relationship or hostile relationship.
- Social relationship only.
- Limited work relationship.
- Adequate work relationship.
- Informed relationship.
- Reciprocal work relationship.

Teachers who are expected to coteach, who don’t know each other, or don’t like each other, or who only communicate socially may start out the coteaching process at the beginning level. Teachers who have a limited work relationship also may enter the coteaching process at the beginning level. When coteachers who have limited or no professional relationship are assigned to work together, the developmental process may be slowed.

- **Beginning Stage.** At the beginning level of coteaching, teachers communicate superficially, as they develop a sense of boundaries and attempt to establish a professional working relationship. Moving from a social relationship to a professional relationship with a colleague may be difficult for some pairs of teachers. Some general educators may experience feelings of intrusion and invasion. Special educators may feel uncomfortable, detached, and excluded. At the beginning stage teachers may tread more slowly as they work to determine role expectations. Communication may be polite, guarded, and infrequent. Unless there is a clear sense of the developmental process and the goal of collaboration is a mutual one, teachers may get “stuck” at this level. It may be that much of the dissatisfaction that is noted in the literature regarding coteaching is expressed by teachers who continue to interact at the beginning level.
- **Compromising Stage.** Teachers who have adequate work relationships display more open and interactive communication. An increase in professional communication is evident. Although students benefit from this increase in communication, a sense of “give and take” and compromise pervades at this level. The special education teacher may be taking a more active role in the classroom teaching but, in doing so, may have had to “give up” something in return. The compromises at this stage help the coteachers to build a level of trust that is necessary for them to move to a more collaborative partnership. Open and honest “give and take” is the essence of the third stage.
- **Collaborative Stage.** At the collaborative level, teachers openly communicate and interact. Communication, humor, and a high degree of comfort punctuate the coteaching, collaborative classroom. This high level of comfort is experienced by teachers, students, and even visitors. The two teachers work together and complement each other. At this stage, it is often difficult for outsiders to discern which teacher is the special educator and which is the general educator.

strate effective ways to listen, communicate, solve problems, and negotiate with each other. This is especially valuable when the coteaching partners are

male and female, as students have the opportunity to observe effective communication between the sexes.

Physical Arrangement

Coteachers need to come to some kind of agreement on the physical arrangement of the classroom: the placement

and arrangement of materials, students, and teachers. At the beginning stage, physical arrangements often give an impression of separateness. In some classrooms, we have noticed that students with disabilities are seated together. At first, there tends to be little ownership of materials or space by the special educator. The special educator does not feel free to access or share materials, but asks permission to do so, or continues to bring into the classroom his or her own materials. Sometimes the general educator assigns a particular place for the special educator to sit, or the special educator may choose a space at the back of the room or at a table separate from the other students. These delegated spaces are rarely abandoned during the coteaching class. Delegated spaces rarely include the front of the classroom. There often appear to be “invisible walls” that separate the space of the two teachers. These walls are rarely crossed by students or teachers. In fact, at the beginning level, it often “feels” as though there is a classroom within a classroom.

At the compromising stage, one sees more movement and shared space in the classroom. The two teachers begin to share materials, and territoriality becomes less evident. The special education teacher moves more freely throughout the room, but rarely takes the center stage.

At the collaboration level, students’ seating arrangements become intentionally interspersed throughout the classroom for whole-group lessons. All students participate in cooperative grouping assignments. Teachers are more fluid in their positioning in the classroom. Both teachers control space and are cognizant of each other’s position in the room. Much like the effective doubles team in tennis, when one teacher moves to the left of the room, the other moves more to the middle of the room so that the classroom is always effectively “covered.” This fluid movement becomes unplanned and natural in the collaborative cotaught classroom. Space is truly jointly owned now.

Familiarity with the Curriculum

Becoming competent and confident in the general education curriculum is an important component of the coteaching relationship. The special educator’s goal should not be to take on the role of the general education teacher as the deliverer of the content. Acquiring a knowledge of the scope and sequence and developing a solid understanding of the content of the curriculum, however, are essential in progressing to the collaborative stage.

At the beginning stage, the special education teacher may be unfamiliar with the content or methodology used by the general education teacher. This lack of knowledge creates a lack of confidence in both teachers. The general education teacher may have limited confidence in the special education teacher’s ability to teach the curriculum and may be reluctant to “give over the chalk” to the special education teacher. This lack of confidence may make it more difficult for the special education teacher to make suggestions for accommodations and modifications that may benefit students. As the two teachers move toward the collaborative stage, the confidence of both teachers grows regarding the curriculum. As the level of competence and confidence increases, general education teachers become more willing to modify the curriculum and share in planning and teaching. At the collaborative stage, both teachers appreciate the specific curriculum competencies that they bring to the content area.

Curriculum Goals and Modifications

Dealing effectively with curriculum goals and modifications involves the planning of the specific goals and objectives for each student. When both general and special education teachers are responsible for the success of all students in the cotaught classroom, the teachers need to discuss goals, accommodations, and modifications that will be necessary for specific students to be successful. Extensive planning that occurs before the start of the school year and on an ongoing basis enhances the coteaching relationship. “Not enough

planning time” or “no planning time” is a common complaint among coteachers and cannot be taken lightly. Without planning time, some coteachers move at a very slow pace in the development of their relationship. Without planning time, coteachers are not able to discuss the curriculum goals and modifications that may be needed by students.

At the beginning stages of the coteaching relationship, programs tend to be driven by textbooks and standards, and goals tend to be “test-driven.” At this stage, modifications to the curriculum and accommodations for learners with special needs are generally restricted to those identified in the individualized education programs (IEPs). The special education teacher’s role is often viewed as the “helper” in the classroom; little interaction regarding modifications to the curriculum takes place at this stage. As coteachers move toward the compromise stage, they begin to see additional modifications and accommodations, particularly for students with more “visible” special needs.

At the compromising state, the general education teacher may view modifications as “giving up” something or as “watering down” the curriculum. Teachers may not appreciate that some students may require modifications in the content for which they are responsible until the teachers reach the collaborative stage. At this stage, both teachers begin to differentiate concepts that all students must know (big ideas) from

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concepts that most students should know (essential knowledge). This differentiation marks the collaborative stage for both teachers. From this differentiation, modifications of content, activities, homework assignments, and tests become the norm for students who require them.

Instructional Planning

Instructional planning involves on-the-spot, day-to-day, week-to-week, and unit-to-unit planning of coursework. Effective planning requires that teachers appreciate the need for modifications of the curriculum, as well as accept the responsibilities of teaching all students in the classroom. Common planning time is essential if teachers are to become truly collaborative.

When coteachers are working at the beginning stage, one often sees two types of service delivery. At times there are distinct and separate curriculums being taught within the classroom to individuals or small groups of students. These separate curriculums often do not parallel each other and do not lend themselves to occasional large-group instruction. At other times (and, frankly, all too often in coteaching classrooms), one sees the general educator teaching the group and the special educator assuming the role of classroom assistant. Often the special educator is seen circulating the room helping students to remain on task or helping to manage students' behavior. Not knowing how the lesson is organized and how the lesson will proceed places the special education teacher at a distinct disadvantage in being helpful to the students or the general education teacher.

As the two educators move toward the compromising stage in instructional planning, they begin to show more give

Classroom management involves community building and relationship building.

and take in the planning. They share more planning. This mutuality of planning continues to expand, until the two teachers reach the collaborative level. Now planning becomes ongoing and shared. At this stage the teachers seem to be continually planning, outside of the classroom, as well as during the instructional lesson. The "mini-caucus" is one evidence of the collaborative level. This occurs when the two teachers realize the need for an on-the-spot change in the lesson and agree to change course during the lesson to accommodate learners who may be struggling with a concept being presented. Mutual planning and sharing of ideas becomes the norm at the collaborative stage.

Instructional Presentation

The presentation of lessons and structuring of classroom activities comprise

The Coteaching Rating Scale can help teachers focus on areas that need improvement.

the instructional presentation component of the coteaching classroom. Again, at the beginning level, teachers often present separate lessons. There may be separate lessons within the classroom or one presentation made by one teacher. At the beginning level, the instructional presentation places one teacher in the role of the "boss" who "holds the chalk," and the other teacher in the role of "helper." As the relationship develops, some of the presentation or lesson structuring begins to be shared. Now both teachers may direct some of the activities in the classroom. Often the special education teacher offers mini-lessons or clarifies strategies students may use. These interactions are evidence of the compromising level.

As the level of competence and confidence increases, general education teachers become more willing to modify the curriculum and share in planning and teaching.

At the collaborative level, both teachers participate in the presentation of the lesson, provide instruction, and structure the learning activities. The "chalk" passes freely between the teachers, because both are engaged in the presentation and activities. Students address questions and discuss concerns with both teachers.

Classroom Management

Effective classroom management involves two major components: structure and relationships. In a structured environment, rules and routines structure the learning experience. Teachers have consistent expectations for students' behavior, which are clear to the students, and which are enforced within the classroom. Classroom management also involves community building and relationship building. The development of relationships and community in the classroom contributes to effective classroom management. An effective classroom manager appreciates how both components contribute to an efficiently run classroom.

When two teachers work in one classroom, both must understand their roles and the rules of the classroom. At the beginning stage, it is sometimes the case that the special educator assumes the role of "behavior manager" for students, so that the other teacher can "teach." The relegation of this role serves to undermine this teacher's position in the classroom as a teacher. At

Figure 4. The Coteaching Rating Scale

General Education Teacher Format

Respond to each question below by circling the number that best describes your viewpoint:

1: Rarely	2: Sometimes	3: Usually
1. I can easily read the nonverbal cues of my coteaching partner.	1	2 3
2. Both teachers move freely about the space in the cotaught classroom.	1	2 3
3. My coteacher understands the curriculum standards with respect to the content area in the cotaught classroom.	1	2 3
4. Both teachers in the cotaught classroom agree on the goals of the cotaught classroom.	1	2 3
5. Planning can be spontaneous, with changes occurring during the instructional lesson.	1	2 3
6. My coteaching partner often presents lessons in the cotaught class.	1	2 3
7. Classroom rules and routines have been jointly developed.	1	2 3
8. Many measures are used for grading students.	1	2 3
9. Humor is often used in the classroom.	1	2 3
10. All materials are shared in the classroom.	1	2 3
11. The special educator is familiar with the methods and materials with respect to this content area.	1	2 3
12. Modifications of goals for students with special needs are fully incorporated into this class.	1	2 3
13. Planning for classes is the shared responsibility of both teachers.	1	2 3
14. The “chalk” passes freely between the two teachers.	1	2 3
15. A variety of classroom management techniques is used to enhance learning of all students.	1	2 3
16. Test modifications are commonplace.	1	2 3
17. Communication is open and honest.	1	2 3
18. There is fluid positioning of teachers in the classroom.	1	2 3
19. I am confident of the special educator’s knowledge of the curriculum content.	1	2 3
20. Student-centered objectives are incorporated into the classroom curriculum.	1	2 3
21. Time is allotted (or found) for common planning.	1	2 3
22. Students accept both teachers as equal partners in the learning process.	1	2 3
23. Behavior management is the shared responsibility of both teachers.	1	2 3
24. Goals and objectives in IEPs are considered as part of the grading for students with special needs.	1	2 3

coteaching relationship, teachers may more quickly move to the collaborative level.

The deployment of two professional staff to teach one classroom is an extremely effective way of providing instruction to increasingly diverse

groups of students in general education classrooms. It also is a very costly practice. Administrators and supervisors need to be able to examine the effectiveness of this practice. They can modify the use of the CtRS to use it as part of a supervisory tool for examining the

effectiveness of coteaching in their buildings. The CtRS allows the supervisor to focus on specific aspects of the coteaching relationship that may need improvement.

There are two forms of the CtRS. The special educator on the coteaching team completes the Special Education Form (Figure 3), and the general educator completes the General Education Form (Figure 4). Each form asks similar questions. To complete the CtRS, coteachers simply answer the questions on the scale. (For further technical instructions on scoring and creating a profile, contact the authors.) Coteachers benefit from completing the CtRS independently and then comparing results with their partners. This can form the beginnings of professional discussions for the coteachers as they evaluate their perspectives of their work in the cotaught classroom.

Suppose that two teachers take the CtRS, and find that they disagreed about familiarity with the curriculum. While the general education teacher has some concern with regard to the special educator’s familiarity and competence with the content area, the special educator has a differing opinion. Though it is not the special educator’s job to become a curriculum expert in the content areas he or she is coteaching, it is important that the special educator become familiar with curriculum content at a level that is comfortable for the general education teacher.

The solution? The supervisor, or the coteachers themselves, might suggest that the special educator begin to teach some “mini-lessons” to demonstrate and practice competence with the curriculum. Conducting “mini-lessons” is often a nonthreatening way for the special education teacher to gain more teaching time within the coteaching classroom. “Mini-lessons” also serve the purpose of building the confidence of the general education teacher in the special educator’s skills in the curriculum areas and may help the team move toward the collaborative level on the component of instructional presentation.

With additional time for planning and some work on helping the general

Books About Coteaching

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- DeBoer, A. (1995). *Working together*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.*
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educator develop a higher level of confidence with the special educator's knowledge of the curriculum, this hypothetical team shows much promise for developing a collaborative partnership. They are off to a great start.

Suppose another team of coteachers has several areas of disagreement and great discrepancies in scoring, particularly in communication, curriculum, and classroom management. For such teachers, improving their listening skills and dealing directly and openly with issues may help the team to enrich their communication. Working together on curricular and classroom management concerns may also augment the development of the team's interpersonal communication.

Teams need to be assured that truly collaborative partnerships take time and effort to develop. By completing the CtRS, these teachers have taken an initial step in examining their partnership; pinpointing areas of strength and weakness in their relationship; and setting goals that will enable them to work toward a satisfying, rewarding, and collaborative partnership.

Final Thoughts

The Coteaching Rating Scale appears to be an effective tool in identifying a profile of strengths and weaknesses in coteaching classrooms. By using a scale that focuses on the specific components of the coteaching relationship at each developmental level, teachers and supervisors can determine the effectiveness of classroom practices and develop strategies to improve programs. A benefit of the CtRS is to highlight important

aspects of collaboration that contribute to the success of the coteaching model. This level of success will enhance the experience of inclusion for all students and adults in the classroom.

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